

LEFTY O'the BUSH



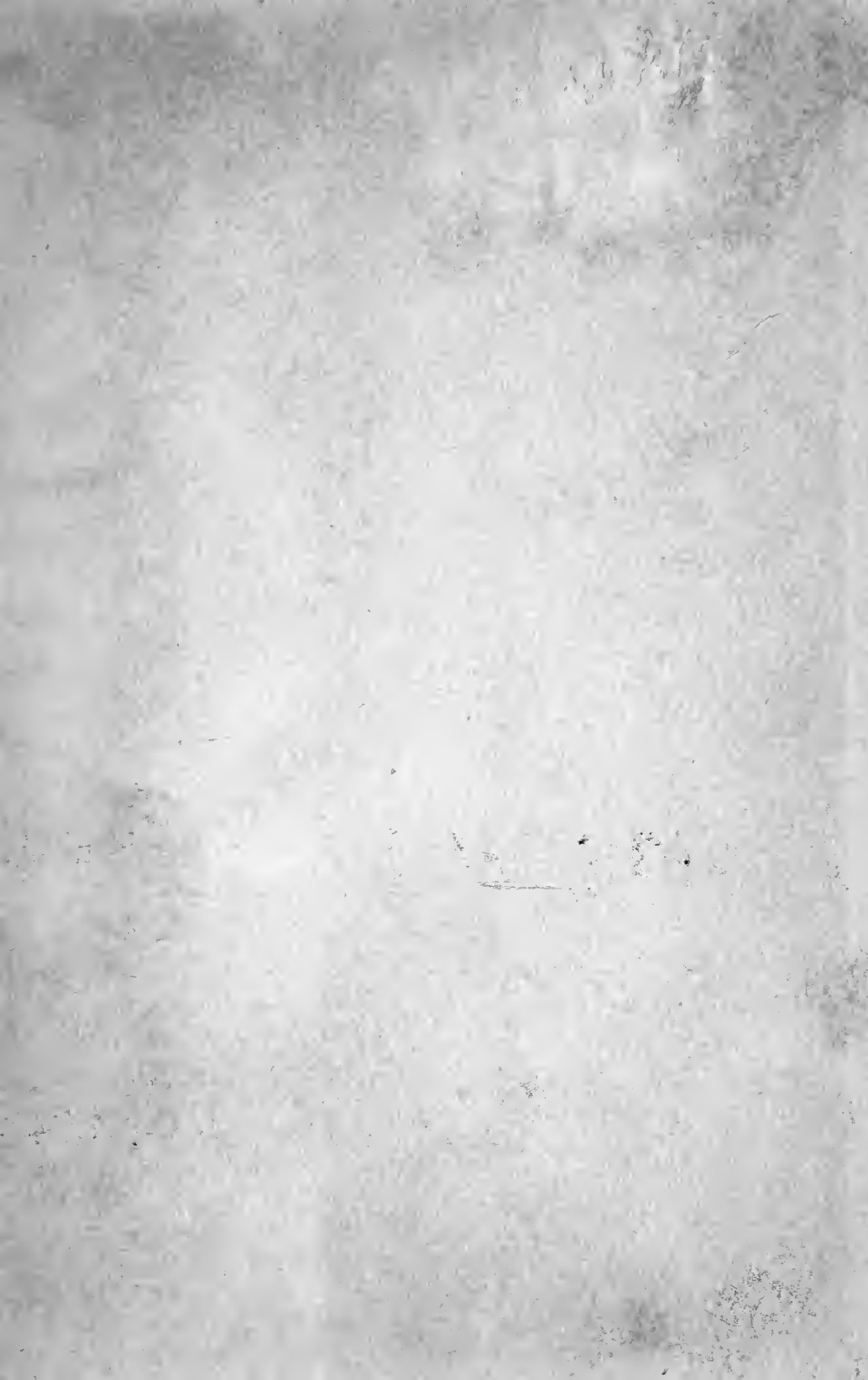
BURT L. STANDISH

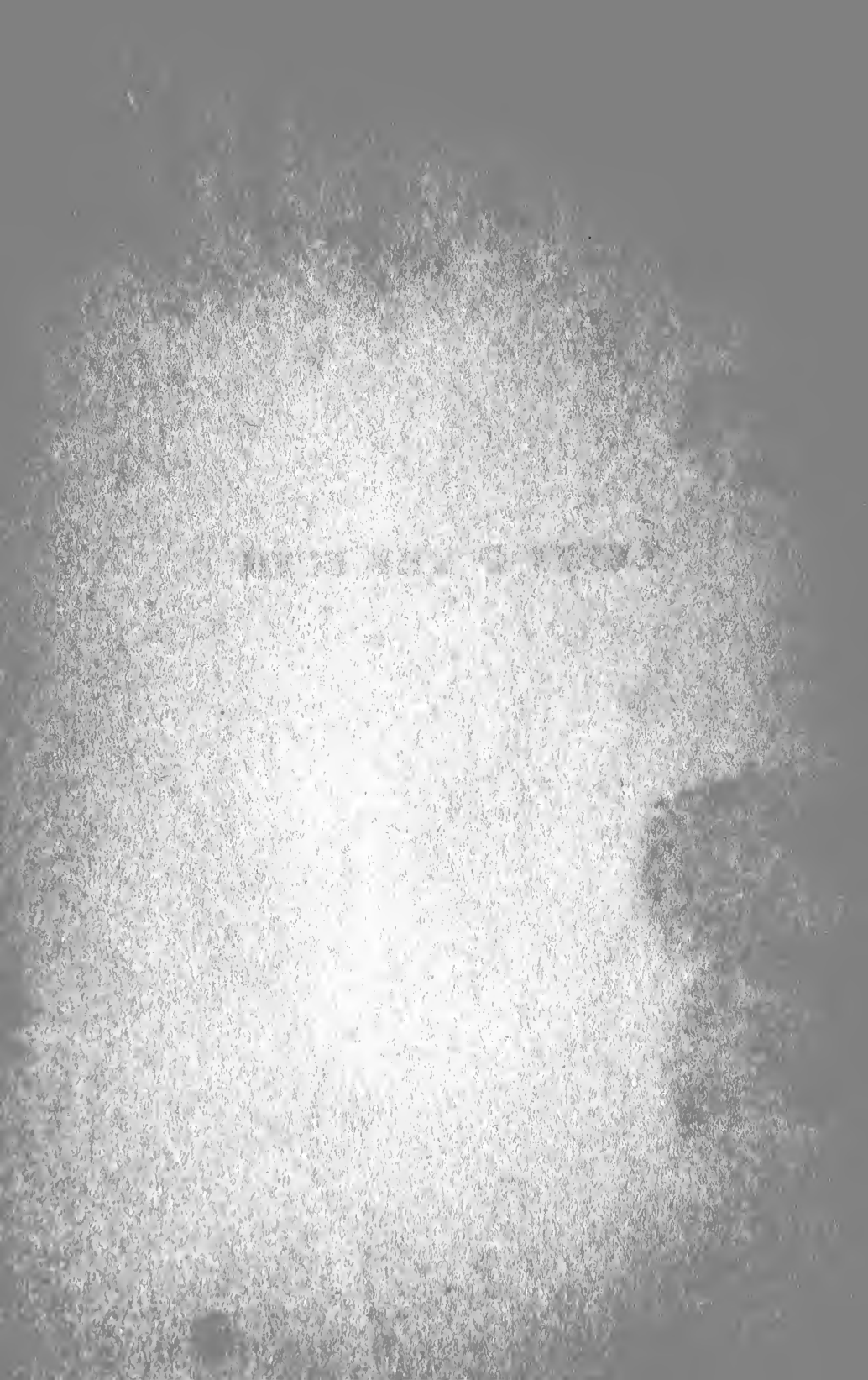
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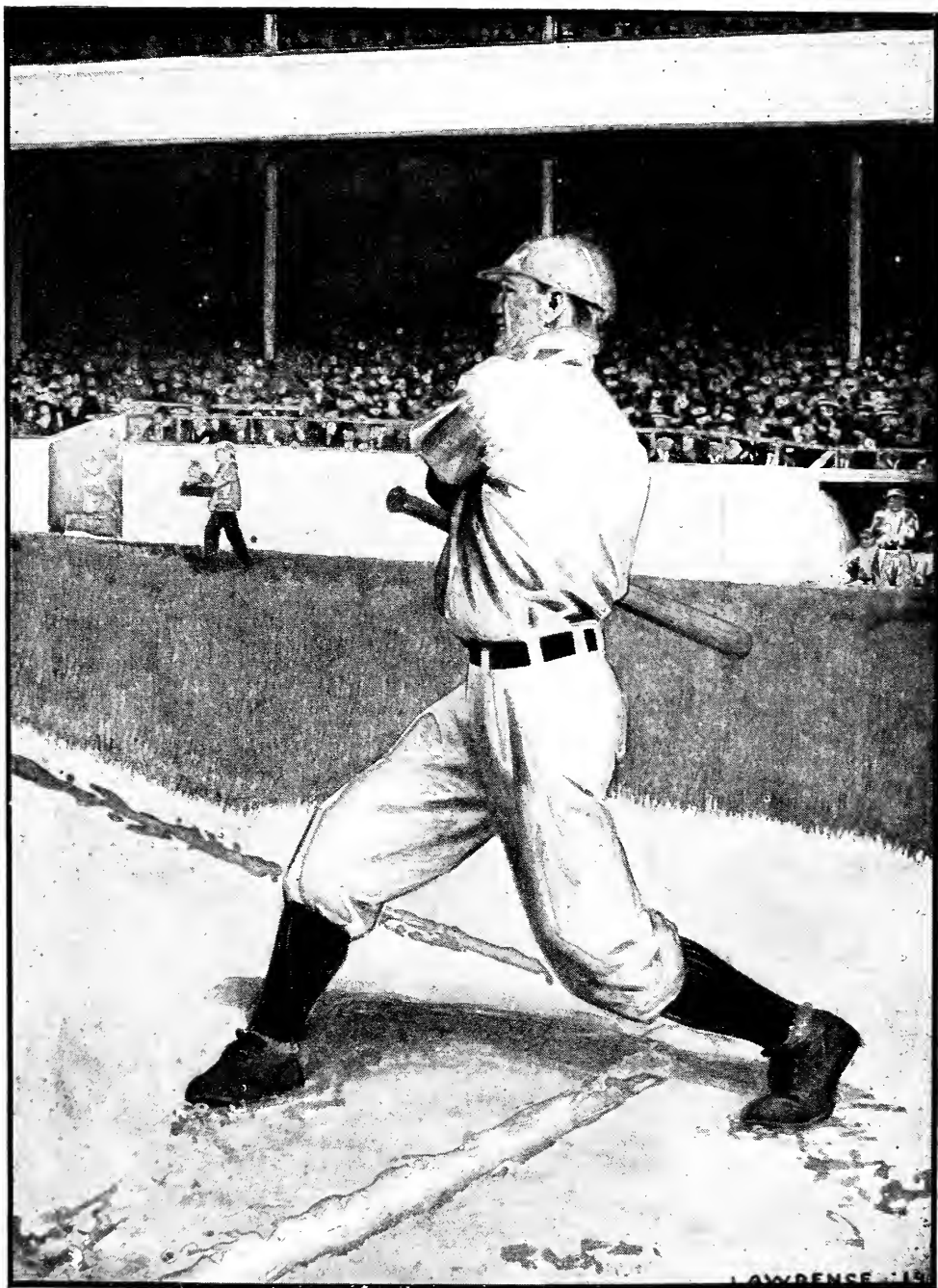




LEFTY O' THE BUSH







THERE WAS A SHARP, CLEAN CRACK, AND THE HORSEHIDE
WENT HUMMING INTO THE OUTFIELD.

LEFTY O' THE BUSH

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

Author of "Lefty o' the Big League," Lefty o' the Blue
Stockings," "Lefty o' the Training Camp,"
"Brick King, Backstop," etc.

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LEFTY O' THE BUSH

CHAPTER I

OUT IN THE BUSH

AFTER running his eye over the Kingsbridge batting order, Mike Riley, manager of the Bancroft "Bullies," rolled the black cigar well into the corner of his mouth, lifted himself ponderously to his feet, and walked across toward the bench of the home team.

Kingsbridge had taken the field for practice, the visitors having warmed up already. The Northern League, a genuine "bush" organization, had opened two days earlier in Bancroft and Fryeburg, but this was to be the first game of the season in Kingsbridge, a hustling, crude, though ambitious pulp-mill town.

As it was Saturday afternoon, when the mills closed down at three o'clock, there was certain to be a big crowd in attendance, double assurance of which could be seen in the rapidly filling grand stand and bleachers, and the steady stream of humanity pouring in through the gates.

As Riley approached, a lean, sallow man, with a hawk-beak nose, rose from the home bench and nodded, holding out a bony hand, which, cold as a dead fish, was almost smothered in the pudgy paw put forth to meet it.

"Hello, Hutch!" gurgled the manager of the Bullies, with a show of cordiality, although he quickly dropped the chilling hand. "How's tricks? See you took a fall outer Fryeburg yis-tidday."

"Yes, we got away with it," answered the local manager, in a monotonous, dead-level voice, lacking wholly in enthusiasm. "But the 'Brownies' are a cinch; nothing but a bunch of raw kids."

"Uh-huh!" grunted Riley, twisting his thumb into the huge watch chain which spanned the breadth of his bulging waistcoat; "that's right. Still, you didn't have much leeway to spare, did ye?"

"Put it over by one measly run, that's all. Deever's arm went on the blink in the seventh, and the greenhorns came near hammering out a win. Locke managed to hold 'em."

"Who is this Locke? I see he's down to wing 'em for you to-day. Where'd you find him, huh?"

"Don't ask me who he is. I never heard of

him before. He's some green dub of a port-side flinger old man Cope picked up. You know Cope used to play the game back in the days of the Deluge, and he thinks he knows all about it. As he's chairman of the Kingsbridge Baseball Association, and one of the heaviest backers of the team, folks round here let him meddle enough to keep him appeased. All the same, long as they've hired me to manage, I'm going to manage, after I've shown 'em how much Cope don't know about it."

"That's the talk, Hutch," chuckled the Bancroft manager. "You've got some team, and you oughter be able to make it interestin' for the rest of us, if the rubes let you have your swing. It was that old fox, Cope, who got Deever away from me arter I had Pat as good as signed, which makes me feel a bit raw, natural. Outside of Deever, and Locke, and a few others, I s'pose the team's practically your make-up?"

"Then you've got another guess coming," returned Bob Hutchinson. "Skillings, Lace, Crandall, and Hickey make the whole of my picking; Cope practically got together the rest of the bunch. But wait; some of 'em won't hold their jobs long, between you and me, Mike.

"Perhaps we hadn't better chin any longer, for

I see we're being watched, and the people of this town are so hot against Bancroft, and you in particular, that they might get suspicious, and think there was something crooked doing if we talked too long."

"Guess that's right," admitted Riley. "They ain't got no love for me in Kingsbridge, 'count of our rubbing it inter them last year. Makes me laugh, the way they squealed. They were so sore they swore they'd have a team to beat us this year at any cost. That's how you got your job; they decided to have a reg'ler manager, who could give all his time and attention to handlin' the team. Sorry for you, Hutch, but if they beat Bancroft under the wire with the bunch they've scraped together, I'll quit the game for good. So long."

Having learned that Hutchinson was not wholly responsible for the make-up of the Kingsbridge nine, Riley did not hesitate to express himself in this manner, thus betraying the disdain in which he really held his opponents of the day.

Only once since the organization of the so-called Northern League, which really had very little organization whatever, being run, like many small, back-country "leagues," in a loose, hit-or-miss fashion—only once had Bancroft failed to win

the championship; and that year Riley, a minor leaguer before age and avoirdupois had deposited him in the can, had not handled the club.

Bancroft was a city, and it cut her fans deeply to be downed on the diamond by a smaller place, besides severely wounding in their pockets some of the sports who had wagered real money. Hence the former successful manager was called back to the job, at which he was always prepared to make good through any means available.

Kingsbridge had entered the league the previous season, filling the place of a town that, loaded with baseball debts, and discouraged by poor success, had dropped out. Owing its existence to Cyrus King, lumberman and pulp manufacturer, Kingsbridge was barely four years old, yet its inhabitants already numbered nearly five thousand.

Furthermore, it was confidently looking forward to the time, believed to be not far distant, when it should outstrip the already envious city of Bancroft, and become the "metropolis" of that particular region.

While pretending to scoff at the "mushroom village," Bancroft was secretly disturbed and worried, fearing the day when Kingsbridge, through the enterprise of its citizens, the interest

and power of its founder, and the coming of a second railroad, which was seeking a charter, would really forge to the front, and leave the "big town down the river" in the lurch. Therefore, quite naturally, the rivalry between the two places was intense in other things besides baseball.

There is nothing like the game, however, to bring to the surface the jealousies and rivalries existing between towns having contending teams; something about the game is certain to tear open old sores and stir up ancient animosities apparently long forgotten.

Especially is this true in minor leagues and "out in the bush," where not infrequently it appears to the chance stranger that whole towns—men, women, and children—have gone baseball crazy.

It is in such places that one may see the game, as a game, at its best—and its worst. Here victory or defeat assumes a tragic importance that must seem laughable to the ordinary city fan; the former being frequently the cause of rejoicing and celebrating, sometimes with fireworks and brass bands, while the latter will cast over the community a cloud of gloom which could be equaled only by an appalling catastrophe.

This intensity of feeling and emotion may

scarcely be understood by a person who has never followed with individual interest the fortunes of a backwoods team, tasting the sweet intoxication of triumph, hard earned and contested to the last ditch, or the heartbreaking bitterness of defeat and shattered hopes.

CHAPTER II

UNDER COVER

KINGSBRIDGE, with its pulp-mill and saw-mill laborers, was precisely the sort of a place to back a team to the limit, and to demand a winning club, regardless of expense.

On Saturdays, because of the early shutting down of the mills, nearly all the laborers could get out to witness the contests, and few there were who failed to attend, unless sickness or imperative necessity kept them away. In fact, on the last day of the week, the attendance in that town was as large as the average turnout in Bancroft.

The mill town's initial experience had been most unsatisfactory and discouraging. Starting out with a nine made up of youngsters, among whom were college men and high-school boys, it had made a promising beginning, actually standing at the head of the league for almost three weeks, and then fighting Bancroft for first place for an equal length of time.

But the youngsters did not seem to have staying qualities, and this, combined with poor man-

agement and the "fair-or-foul" methods of the Bullies, had eventually sent Kingsbridge down the ladder to finish the season at the very foot of the list.

This failure, however, simply aroused the town to grim determination, bringing about the organization of a baseball association which included many of the leading citizens, Henry Cope, who kept the largest general store in town, being chosen chairman. The association pledged itself to put a winning team on to the field, and Cope, having considerable knowledge of baseball and players, set to work in midwinter preparing for the coming campaign. He was given a comparatively free hand by his associates, although, in order that Bancroft might not hear and get wise, the purpose of his movements was kept secret until it was almost time for the league to open.

Then it became known that Bob Hutchinson, a manager who had handled teams in one of the well known minor leagues, had been secured to take charge of the "Kinks." It was also made public that a team of fast and experienced players throughout had been signed, and the names of several of these players were printed in the sporting column of the *Bancroft News*.

Hope flamed high in Kingsbridge. The topic

of the street corners was baseball. It was freely proclaimed that the town was prepared to take a heavy fall out of Bancroft, and would begin by downing the "hated enemy" in the very first clash, which was scheduled to occur in the down-river city.

Of course a few pessimistic killjoys, of whom every community must have its quota, scoffed at the efforts and expectations of the enthusiasts, declaring it was not possible for a place no larger than Kingsbridge, no matter how earnestly it might try, to defeat a city with Bancroft's record and resources. These croakers were not popular, yet their gloomy prophecies awakened misgivings in many a heart.

In Bancroft the midwinter silence of Kingsbridge had aroused some alarm lest the mill town, troubled with cold feet, should fail to come to the scratch when the season opened, which would make it necessary to lure some other place into the fold, or run the league three-cornered, something most unpleasant and undesirable.

Even when Kingsbridge sent a representative to attend the usual annual meeting of the league association, the quiet declination of that representative to give out any particulars concerning the personnel of the up-river team had left a feel-

ing of uneasiness, despite his repeated assurance that there would be such a team.

Later, on the appearance of the newspaper report that Kingsbridge had engaged Bob Hutchinson as manager, and the publication of an incomplete roster of the mill-town players, Bancroft's relief and satisfaction had been tempered by alarm of a different nature. For it now became apparent that the city's ambitious rival had all along been quietly at work preparing to spring a surprise in the form of an unusually strong nine that would make the other clubs go some, right from the call of "play."

Mike Riley had not sought to allay this final feeling of apprehension; on the contrary, for purely personal reasons, he fostered it. For would it not encourage the backers of his team, believing as they did in his sound baseball sense, to give him even greater liberty in management? And when he should again win the championship, as he secretly and egotistically felt certain of doing, the luster of the accomplishment must seem far more dazzling than usual.

After Bancroft's opening-day success, when she had rubbed it into the Kinks to the tune of 8 to 4, Riley became completely satisfied that the Kingsbridge nine was a false alarm.

Aware of Hutchinson's particular weaknesses, he had never really feared the man; but let this much be said to Riley's credit: whenever possible, he preferred to capture victory by the skill and fighting ability of his team, rather than through secret deals and shady, underhanded methods. And he always developed a team of aggressive, browbeating fighters; hence the far-from-pleasing appellation of "Bullies."

In her second game, Kingsbridge's victory over Fryeburg had come as a surprise to Manager Riley, whose judgment had led him to believe that the Brownies would also open the season with a triumph on their own field. Hence his desire to question Hutchinson about it.

Tom Locke, the new pitcher who had relieved Pat Deever when the Fryeburgers took Deever's measure in the seventh, was an unknown to Riley, and, the chap being slated to go against Bancroft this day, Mike had sought information concerning him.

Hutchinson, however, could tell him nothing save that the young man had been signed by Henry Cope; but, holding Cope's baseball judgment openly in contempt, this seemed sufficiently relieving, and, complacently chewing his black cigar, he confidently returned to the Bancroft bench.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN TO PITCH

TO the left of the bench, which was set well back against the railing in front of the third-base bleachers, on which a carload of Bancroft fans were bunched, Jock Hoover, the star slabman of the team, was warming up with Bingo Bangs, the catcher.

Hoover, speedy, pugnacious, with an arm of iron, the face of a Caliban, and the truculence of an Attila, was well calculated to inspire respect and fear when on the mound; and his mid-season acquirement by Bancroft the year before had doubtless fixed that team in first position, and marked the assured downfall of Kingsbridge, against whom he was most frequently worked.

In Bancroft, Hoover was admired and toadied; in Kingsbridge he was most cordially hated. More than once his intimidating methods on the latter field had come perilously close to producing a riot, which, had it ever started among the mill men, must have been a nasty affair.

Never in the most threatening moments of the

rough crowd's clamoring, however, had Hoover turned a hair. Always through it all he had sneered and grinned contemptuously, apparently inviting assault, and showing disappointment when the better element among the crowd, who cared for the sport as a sport, and knew the harm to the game that a pitched battle must bring, succeeded in holding the hot-headed and reckless ones in check.

Biting off the end of his cigar, Riley stood watching Hoover meditatively. Out on the field the locals were getting in the last snappy bit of preliminary practice, and the game would begin in a few minutes. The manager's eyes had left Hoover and sought "Butch" Prawley, one of the other two pitchers, when a hand touched his arm, and some one spoke to him. Rolling his head toward his shoulder, he saw "Fancy" Dyke standing on the other side of the rail.

Francis Dyke, a young sporting man of Bancroft, was one of the backers of the team. To him a baseball game on which he had not placed a wager worth while was necessarily slow and uninteresting, even though well fought and contested to the finish. Son of a horseman who had won and lost big sums on the turf, Fancy, apparently inheriting the gaming instinct, had turned to base-

ball with the decline of racing. His nickname came through his taste for flashy clothes.

"Don't you do it," said Dyke, vapory bits of bluish cigarette smoke curling from his thin lips as he spoke.

"Do what?" grunted Riley in surprise.

"Run in Prawley. You were thinking of letting Hoover squat on the bench."

"How'd you know that?" asked the manager, still more surprised.

"Saw it on your face."

"If my mug gives me away in that fashion, I'll trade it for another," growled Mike, in displeasure. "But why not pitch Prawley? He can swaller that bunch, one after another, without greasin'. This is our first game here, and Jock ain't so pop'ler in this town."

"What do you care about that? It's our first game here, and we want it, to hold first place. If they should happen to trim us to-day, they'd have us tied."

With the mutilated and lifeless cigar gripped in his coarse teeth, Riley pulled down the corners of his big mouth disdainfully. "Trim us—with that bunch of scrubs and has-beens! Why, they couldn't do it if I went in and pitched myself."

"Take it from me, 'tain't wise to be so cock-

sure. I've been watching their new pitcher warm up. He's a southpaw."

"And a green one from the scrub pastures somewhere. The boys will send him to the stable in about three innin's."

"Perhaps. But I walked over in range while he was limbering his flinger, and he's got a few good benders, not to mention some speed. You don't want to forget that we've got five left-hand batters, and a southpaw that can really pitch may bother 'em some. I reckon that's just why they've raked in this feller Locke."

"Don't you b'lieve it. Just spoke to Hutch about him, and Hutch don't know no more'n you or me. Old Cope signed Locke and the most of the team, and he'd never figger on a lefty worry-in' us because we've got so many left-hand hitters."

"That," persisted Dyke, "don't alter the conditions any. This Locke stopped Fryeburg after they blanketed Deever, and Kingsbridge wants this game to-day—*bad*. I've heard some of the Bridgers talkin', and they're plenty confident, thinking they've got a wiz in this southpaw kid."

"To-morrow's Sunday, and Hoover can rest," he added. "He's hard as nails, and you won't

hurt him, even if you have to use him again Monday. Always play the game safe when you can—that's my motto. I'll take chances, all right, if I have to, but I've never yet let my conscience fret me into ducking a bet on a sure thing. Hoover is the Kinks' hoodoo, and it ought to be pretty safe with him handing 'em."

"Safe," gurgled Riley, highly amused. "I should guess yes. They think they've got some players, but, with Hutchinson furnishin' only four out of the 'leven men they have, as he told me, and Cope diggin' up the rest, most of 'em holdovers from last year, it's a joke.

"Why, I let old Cope have Pat Deeever, though he thinks he got Deeever away from me. Just as I was about to close with Pat, I got it straight that he'd put his wing on the blink for fair, and, by pretendin' I was hot after Deeever all the time, I helped him make a fancy deal with Cope.

"Pat was batted out by the Brownies after fooling 'em along to the seventh with a slow ball that made him sweat drops of blood ev'ry time he boosted it over the pan; but he's foxy, and he'll manage to hang on by bluffing 'em that his arm'll come round soon, see if he don't," added Riley. "The only pitcher they've got is Skillings, and

even he's frapped his wing, pitchin' the drop all the time, which he has to, as he's a mark when he lets up on it."

"You're manager," said Fancy, "and I'm not trying to show you; but I hope you'll play safe by sending Hoover out to start with. If it proves so easy, you can pull him out when you see the game is clinched."

"All right. Jock's name is on the battin' order, and I'll let him start her off."

CHAPTER IV

THE PARSON'S DAUGHTER

DYKE expressed satisfaction, and the hazelnut sparkler in his blazing red tie reflected varicolored gleams from its many facets, as his cupped hands held a burning match to light a fresh cigarette.

As he flung aside the match, and chanced to glance past the far end of the bleachers, his black eyes glinted on beholding a girl in a light dress, shading herself with a pale-blue parasol, and seated in a carriage that had just drawn up in line with others out there. A span of spirited and extremely restless bays were attached to the carriage. At the girl's side, wearing a light suit, straw hat, and tan driving gloves, sat a square-shouldered young man.

"Hel-lo!" breathed Fancy. "There's old man King's cub, with the parson's daughter. I don't blame him, for she certainly is some peach. She must be getting independent; last year I offered to get her a season ticket, but she said her hidebound old man wouldn't let her come to the games, which

he considered sinful and poisonous to the morals of the community."

"Huh!" grunted Riley, eyeing the girl in the carriage. "She's a year older now, and mebbe she's given the old pulpit pounder notice that she proposes henceforth to do about as she pleases. I've heard she's ruther high-strung and lively."

"Well, she's taking a chance with Bent King, 'cording to his college record. He cut it out so hot that he was fired the second year, and then his old man, feeling somewhat peeved, set him to work in the big mill here. Now the brat's foreman of the mill, though I reckon it was his father that put him there over better men, and not his ability."

"Oh, you're jealous," chuckled the manager. "She turned you down when you tried to git gay, that's what's the matter. You oughter considered, Fancy, that your record was agin' ye, and that you was known by reputation in Kingsbridge, just as well as in Bancroft. I've noticed the right sorter gals don't travel in your society extensively."

Dyke's thin cheek took on a faint flush, and he gnawed with his sharp white teeth one corner of his close-cropped, small black mustache.

"I reckon she'd be as safe with me as with Bent,

King," he retorted. "Of course, I know what her old man would think of me; but in these days girls don't tell their folks about every man they're friendly with."

"There's old Cope speakin' to her now," said Riley. "Looket him take the cover off that skatin' rink of his. There's real swagger galantry for ye, Flash."

A stout, red-faced, jolly-looking man in a somewhat soiled snuff-colored suit had paused beside the carriage to lift his hat and speak to the girl, who greeted him with a charming smile and a show of fetching dimples.

"Howdy-do, Janet," said the man on the ground. "I'm s'prised to see you here, though I b'lieve you did tell me you was crazy over baseball. Your father's so set agin' it that I didn't s'pose he'd let you come. Howdy-do, Benton. Fine day for the opening."

"Oh, father is as bad as ever," laughed the girl; "but I told Bent how much I wanted to come, and he drove round and used his persuasion with daddy, who finally consented, after getting a promise that I would sit in the carriage and not step out of it. It was jolly nice of Benton, for I *am* crazy over the game, and I'd go to see one every day if I could."

She was fresh and girlish and unaffected, yet, somehow, she did not give one the impression of crudity and silliness so often shown by a vivacious, blue-eyed blonde. Although very pretty, she was not doll-like, and one who studied her mobile, changeful face would soon discover there, as well as in her voice and manner, unmistakable signs of good breeding and character. Her eyes were unusual; one could not look into their depths without feeling irresistibly attracted toward her.

The young man at her side, a well-set-up chap a trifle above medium height, was the only son of Cyrus King. He was not more than twenty-four, and had a somewhat cynical, haughty face, with a pair of flashing dark eyes and petulant mouth. Nevertheless, when he laughed, which he did quite frequently, he was attractive, almost handsome.

"Yes, Cope," he nodded, as the older man brought forth a handkerchief and mopped his perspiring bald head; "it certainly is a good day for the opening, and there's a cracking crowd out to see it. They're beginning to overflow the seats. Suppose we have any show at all to win?"

"Hey?" cried the chairman of the baseball association. "Any show to win? You bet we have! We're *goin'* to win. We've got to have this first game at home."

"But we're up against Bancroft, and I see Jock Hoover has just finished warming up to pitch for them."

"That'll jest make it all the more interestin'. We've got a pitcher, too, I want you to know. I signed him myself, and he'll make 'em set up and take notice. You jest watch Tom Locke when he goes inter the box."

"I've heard something about him. Who is he? And where did you get him?"

Running the handkerchief round the sweatband inside his soiled straw hat, Henry Cope winked shrewdly, and covered his shining dome.

"Why, didn't I tell ye his name is Tom Locke? Never mind where I picked him up. He's got the goods, and he'll deliver 'em. If he don't jest naturally make them Bullies break their backs poundin' empty air to-day, I'll be the most s'prised man in the county."

"Oh, I hope he *is* good!" exclaimed the girl. "Everybody in town was disappointed over the way Bancroft beat us last year. They all said we needed one corking good pitcher to put up against Bancroft's best man."

"We've got him," assured Henry Cope. "We've got the very feller in this here Locke. You watch and see."

“There goes the umpire,” said King. “They are going to start the game.”

“Excuse me,” said Cope hastily. “I think I’ll git over by our bench, where I can watch Locke work. That’s him—that tall, slim chap goin’ inter the box now. Jest keep your eye on him. So long.”

He hurried away as the umpire called “play” and Bancroft’s first batter rose and trotted out from the bench.

CHAPTER V

A BAD BEGINNING

A YELL rose from the crowd which now almost completely encircled the field. It was not a cheer, such as may sometimes be heard at the beginning of a Big League game; it was a sudden, sharp, nerve-shocking combination of bellow and shriek, primitive in its methodless manner of expressing joyous satisfaction and elation that the moment had arrived for the contest to begin. Thus may have a gathering of primordial mankind, assembled to witness some sort of sanguinary gladiatorial contest, voiced its fierce emotion at the sight of trained warriors charging upon one another in the arena.

This burst of sound died away in a few scattering whoops and yelps as the umpire, body protector adjusted, mask held ready, lifted his hand for silence.

“Game t’-day,” he shouted hoarsely, “Bancroft ag’inst Kingsbridge. Bat’ry f’r Kingsbridge, Locke ’n’ Oulds; bat’ry f’r Bancroft, Hoover ’n’ Bangs. Pla-a-ay ball-ll!”

"Ye-ee-ee!" shrieked the crowd, and then settled down to enjoy the struggle.

Bill Harney, clever sticker and captain of the Bancroft team, was ready at the plate. "Hunchy" Oulds, breastplated and masked, spat into the pocket of his catching mitt, rubbed the moisture about on the dented leather with his fingers, and then squatted behind the pan to signal. The umpire, celluloid recorder held behind his back, leaned forward on his toes to get a clear view over Oulds' head. Tom Locke toed the slab.

"Git th' fust one, boy!" roared a voice from the crowd. "Show what y' c'n do. Breeze him!"

The tall young man on the mound gave a shake of his head as he tossed back a lock of brown hair. His clean-cut face was a bit pale, and he seemed somewhat nervous, which was not strange, considering his apparent youth and the nature of the tumultuous, rough-and-ready crowd whose eyes were fastened upon him. He wore a glove on his right hand, and it was his cleat-tipped right shoe that touched the slab. Leaning forward, he nodded a bit as he caught the catcher's signal, swinging immediately into his delivery.

"Ball!" bellowed the umpire, as the sphere went shooting over, high and wide, a white streak in the air.

"Aw-w, get 'em down!" brayed the coacher back of first, while the one on the opposite side of the diamond whooped derisively, and the batter, having flung a glance skyward, grinned in a taunting way. "He ain't on stilts. He can't reach 'em in the clouds," added the coacher.

"Stiddy, boy," gurgled Oulds, returning the ball. "Make him hit."

That first wide one brought a mocking shout from the Bancroft bunch on the bleachers, and apparently Locke grew still more nervous, for his second pitch forced Harney to do a lively dodge to avoid being bored in the ribs.

"Ball tuh!"

"Wow-wow!" barked one coacher. "He's wild as mountain scenery."

"Take a ramble, Cap; he'll walk ye," cried the other coacher.

The Bancroft rooters scoffed again; the Kingsbridge crowd was anxiously silent.

"Never mind that, kid," soothed Oulds. "Take your time; don't hurry. Make him hit."

The backstop returning the ball, Locke attempted to catch it with his gloved hand, dropped

it, turned hastily, struck it with his toe, and sent it rolling toward second.

Larry Stark, covering that sack, sprang after the sphere, scooped it up, and held it in both hands against his chest while stepping swiftly toward the pitcher to speak a few low, reassuring words. Then he tossed the ball, and danced back to his position.

There was no doubt about it now; plainly Locke was nervous. Seeing this, the coachers and the visiting spectators did what they could to rattle him. Even though he tried to steady himself, the next ball from his fingers whiffed up a pop of dust two feet in front of the plate.

“Ball three!”

“The ascension begins early to-day,” laughed the coacher near third; and the Bancrofters behind him began to sing: “Up in a Balloon, Boys.”

On the home bench, Manager Hutchinson leaned forward, his elbow on his knee, his hand propping his chin, eyes narrowed and fixed on the disturbed pitcher.

Standing behind the bench, Henry Cope removed his old straw hat to mop his bald head and flushed face, trying all the while to preserve a calm and confident smile.

The crowd in the stand and along the right side of the field stirred restlessly. Murmurs were heard: "What's the matter with him?" "Punk!" "Rotten!" "He can't find the plate!" "He's no good!"

"Take your time, Locke," begged Captain Stark. "Don't hurry. Put it straight over, and let him hit. We're behind you."

Harney, sneering, twiddled his bat and made a bluff of turning his back to the plate. Although he did not turn, his indifferent pose spoke his disdain and belief that he would receive a pass.

The assurance was justified. Seeking to get a grip on himself, Tom Locke strove to whip over a straight one. Then—

"Take y'ur base!" croaked the umpire as the horsehide plunked into Oulds' reaching mitt.

CHAPTER VI

“TAKE HIM OUT!”

FLINGING his club toward the bench, Harney jogged lazily down the line, grinning into the faces of the dissatisfied and sullen Kingsbridgers on the bleachers. The chortling coacher hailed him hilariously:

“Too bad! Too bad! That pudding is scared stiff. He won’t last an innin’. Back to the pastures for him.”

The murmurs of the home crowd became louder: “Who ever heard of him, anyhow?” “He can’t pitch!” “Who picked him up?” “He’s Hen Cope’s find.” “What’s old Cope know about baseball?” “That dub never saw a real game before.”

Cope put a hand on Hutchinson’s shoulder. “The boy’ll settle down in a minute,” he said, trying to speak in a confident and undisturbed way. “He’s just a bit shaky to start with, but he’ll git into gear soon.”

“He’d better—in a hurry,” retorted the manager in that same dead-level, colorless voice.

“Four straight balls to begin a game is some rotten pitching.”

“I don’t s’pose he’s uster this sort of a crowd,” admitted Cope apologetically, coming round and seating himself beside Hutchinson. “He’s a gentleman, and he’s usually played with—er—well, gentlemanly comp’ny.”

“He’s out of his element here. This is real baseball, played by scrappers who are ready to fight every inch of the way. Tell me, Mr. Cope, where did you discover that worthless piece of excess baggage?”

The elder man’s face became still redder. “Never you mind about that. I’ve watched his record, and it’s a good one. I didn’t buy no pig in a poke. Didn’t he stop Fryeburg arter Deever blew up?”

“They’re marks. Deever made monkeys of them until his sore wing pegged out. Anybody with a straight ball and a little speed could have held ’em.”

“Mebbe so; but, all the same, I know this feller can pitch.”

“If he don’t show some signs of it pretty soon, I’ll bench him and send Skillings in.”

“Now, you give him a show; you give him a chance. He’ll straighten out, and show you some-

thin'. I'm backin' him, and I want you to listen to me."

"I had an idea," said Hutchinson icily, "that I was engaged to manage this team."

"You was; but I've got somethin' to say, and I insist that that boy has a good, square show."

"Ball!"

Andy Trollop, following Harney at bat, stood lounging, with the club on his shoulder, and watched the first wide one pass, laughing as Oulds, reaching, growled beneath his breath.

"If you try to stop 'em all, Hunchy," said Andy, with pretended solicitude, "you'll strain yourself, and have a doctor's bill to pay. Better let 'em go to the net."

"You go to blazes!" retorted Oulds; which caused Andy to laugh still more.

Instead of throwing the ball to Locke, the catcher suddenly lined it to first base, causing Harney to lunge back under Hinkey's arm to the sack.

Then Oulds removed his mask, and pretended to fuss with the elastic strap, which gave Stark an opportunity to run up to the pitcher and softly urge him to go slow and force Trollop to swing.

"He thinks you can't get 'em over," whispered the captain, "and mebbe he won't strike at the

first one or two you put across. Keep it close, and take a chance. Don't use a bender till you have to. Now, do steady down, son.”

Locke's only reply was a nod. His lips were pressed together, and his face was gray. He could hear the crowd growling everywhere save in the section occupied by the laughing, scoffing Bancrofters; try as he might, he could not deafen his ears to those unpleasant sounds.

“Play ball!” yelled a coacher.

“Play ball, and stop chewin' the rag,” roared a man from the third-base bleachers. “I come here to see a game.”

“Don't look like you'd see much of a one to-day,” said another man. “I'd like to git my money back now.”

Hinkey tossed the ball to Locke. The youngster was deliberate enough in his movements, but still, seeking to put a straight one over on the inside, he compelled the second batter to make a hasty get-away. Oulds popped up from behind the batsman, ready to throw, but Harney had taken no chances.

“Don't have to do it with this duck pitchin',” laughed the captain of the Bullies. “He'll walk us all. It's a shame.”

Now not a few of the local players were be-

ginning to betray annoyance and disgust, and the complaints of the home crowd grew louder. Henry Cope perspired from every pore; but Bob Hutchinson, still with his palm propping his chin, his cold eyes fixed on Locke, did not stir. The harassed pitcher walked in a small, complete circle round the slab.

"Say eeny, meeny, miney, mo, Lefty," advised one of the coaches. "That'll sure break the hoodoo."

"For the love of Mike, do put one over!" entreated a Kingsbridger piteously—so piteously that a few, who had not permitted their sufferings wholly to rob them of their sense of humor, laughed.

But Locke actually handed up the seventh straight ball in succession! This despite the fact that he had never tried harder in all his life to find the plate.

The clamor swelled; the crowd began to hurl insults at the unfortunate twirler. The Bancroft players, waiting on the bench to bat, were choking with laughter. One coacher did monkey-shines, and the other pretended to weep, boring his knuckles into his eyes and bellowing lustily.

Oulds held the ball until ordered to throw it, by the umpire. Locke made a two-handed muff of

that easy toss, and the insults came thicker. Harney, dancing off first, sought to draw a throw, knowing the pitcher in his present state of mind might put the ball into the bleachers.

Locke did throw to first, but he took so much care that the runner was lounging on the sack when Hinkey got the sphere.

“You couldn’t throw out a sick cat in four million years, Lefty,” mocked the coacher.

The local players looked at Captain Stark; Stark looked at Hutchinson on the bench; Hutchinson did not move a muscle.

“Don’t delay the game,” begged Harney. “Let the lobster pitch, if you’re going to.”

Skillings, chewing gum, in anticipation of the call every one seemed to believe must come directly, was keeping his arm limbered by throwing to Deever, the latter sparing his sore wing by tossing the sphere back with his left hand.

Locke’s forehead was knotted as he once more toed the slab. This time he came near getting the ball across, but it missed the corner by an inch, and the umpire, now back of the pitcher, made a sweeping signal with his left arm for Trollop to go down.

“Here we go round the mulberry bush,” sang Harney, jogging to second; but his words were

drowned by the catcalls, whoops, and jeers of the spectators.

"Oh, you left-handed lobster!"

"You're on the blink!"

"Go die somewhere!"

"You can't pitch!"

"You never could pitch!"

"Take it away and bury it!"

"Chase yourself, you skate!"

Eight balls without a break had Tom Locke thrown, passing the first two men to face him. And this was the great southpaw man Kingsbridge had heard so much about lately, the left-handed wizard who was to make the hated Bullies bite the dust!

"Take him out!" shrieked a voice above the clamor.

Instantly the crowd took it up on all sides. "Take him out!" they roared. "Take him out! Take him out!"

Bob Hutchinson lifted his chin from his hand, sat up straight, and turned to Henry Cope.

"Well?" he said.

CHAPTER VII

HIMSELF AGAIN

AMONG the spectators, doubtless, the performance of Tom Locke gave no one keener disappointment and chagrin than that experienced by Janet Harting. She almost writhed, her fair forehead knotted and her rosy mouth puckering and pouting. Once she stood up, but the horses, possibly getting a glimpse of her parasol, started, and young King, quieting them, suggested that it would be best for her to remain on the seat.

“Oh, isn’t it just mean!” the girl cried, as Locke continued to search in vain for the pan. “Everybody expected him to do so much. Mr. Cope was so sure about him, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” said Bent. “For the last few days the whole town has been talking about the wonderful new pitcher and what he would do.”

“It’s a shame! Why, he can’t pitch at all!”

“It doesn’t seem so, but perhaps he may steady down. I once saw a pitcher pass three men

straight, and then strike out the next three without a break."

"Oh, but this one never could do a thing like that. He can't put even a straight one over; he hasn't a bit of control."

"You talk like a fan, Janet. Your father is such a crank—er, excuse me!—that he wouldn't let you see the games last year. Where did you pick up your knowledge?"

"Boarding school. Some of us girls used to get to the college games on Saturday. I declare, I do believe he's going to walk this batter, too! Why don't they take him out and let some one pitch who knows how?"

"There's Cope talking to the manager on the bench. The old man is stubborn, and I presume he's set on giving the great pitcher he signed all the show possible. It hurts his pride to see the fellow fizzle this way."

Janet's blue eyes flashed. "It's simply dreadful!" she panted. "Every day last year I got the score of the games, and it made me ill when our team went to pieces at last, the way it did. And everybody has been saying we'd surely beat Bancroft this year. Hear them mocking us over there! Oh, I'm sorry I came to-day!"

"Cheer up; the game isn't lost just because a

false alarm is unmasking himself in the first inning. The home crowd is getting hot now, and they'll demand that the fellow be benched directly. We've got other pitchers, you know."

"Other pitchers! Don't call this one a pitcher! He's a—a—"

"A flash in the pan," laughed King. "It's a good thing he has betrayed himself right off the reel, for that will give us all the more time to recover from the shock. There, there goes the second batter to first. Now hear the crowd rub it into the poor dub. Oh, say! they're soaking him. There'll be a riot if he isn't sent to the stable pretty quick. Listen to that! I knew it!"

The exasperated Kingsbridgers were howling for the removal of Locke, the cry to take him out immediately swelling into a roar from all sides of the field. Forgetting the cautioning words of her companion, Miss Harting again sprang to her feet.

"Take him out!" she cried; but her voice was drowned in the mighty volume of sound.

"Steady, Janet," said Bent, taking hold of her arm with one hand and gently drawing her back to the seat. "This racket is making the nags nervous, and I'd hate to spill you out, after promising your grudging father to look after you and

see that nothing happened. They'll have to put the blanket on Lefty now. The crowd won't stand for any more of him."

On the Kingsbridge bench Henry Cope and Manager Hutchinson were arguing over it, the former hot and insistent, the latter cold and unemotionally scornful.

"One chance more—give him another show," demanded Cope. "I tell ye I *know* he can pitch."

"Perhaps he can pitch hay," returned Hutchinson; "but not baseball. Listen to that howling mob. They'll murder him pretty quick. I don't want the responsibility on my shoulders."

"I'll take all the responsibility; he's my man, and I'll shoulder it. Let him try the next feller."

"When the whole town gets to kicking at me, will you stand up and say you insisted on it against my wishes?"

"Didn't I jest say I'd shoulder it! Nobody shan't put the blame on you."

"Oh, all right. They'll mob him on the diamond if he hands out another pass, and that's just what he'll do. He's white as a ghost with fear. He couldn't get the ball over now if his life depended on it."

Indeed, the wretched pitcher was ghastly white, the pallor of his face making his dark-brown eyes

seem almost black; and into the depths of those eyes had come a light like a dull-red flame, flaring up swiftly.

A few moments before he had felt his own nerves unsteady, and fought in vain for control of them; now, with the howling demand for his removal hammering into his ears, he suddenly found himself steady as a foundation rock. His resentment and anger was of the white-hot variety that transmutes. A man serene and calm it might unnerve; one doubtful and wavering it might turn to iron.

Slowly he turned until he had faced every side of the field, and all that mass of snarling humanity, yelling at him, jeering, insulting, shaking their fists, their faces red and wroth, their eyes full of contempt, their lips hurling forth threats of bodily violence—and he smiled at them.

“Howl away,” he said, but no one save himself heard the words. “I’ll show you some pitching yet.”

Never before had he pitched in the presence of a crowd of such crude, seemingly ferocious, human beings; but many a time, as he well knew, he had faced batters as skillful and dangerous as these raw, would-be professionals and broken-down cast-offs from minor leagues.

At no time had he feared the hitting ability of his opponents, but, as sometimes happens to the headiest and most seasoned veteran, the moment he toed the slab some incomprehensible thing had taken possession of him, and made him a mockery for the crowd and a sickening shame to himself.

Now, however, he knew the unmanning spirit had been exorcised; he was himself again, clean and fit.

CHAPTER VIII

STEADYING DOWN

TOM LOCKE did not turn his eyes toward the bench; he did not dare, lest a glance should be interpreted as a supplication, and bring about his removal from the field. He saw Oulds, ball in hand, standing squarely on the plate, while "Wop" Grady, the next batter, eager to keep things going and gain as much advantage for Bancroft as possible before another pitcher was sent in, was seeking to push him back into his position.

His manner entirely changed, although his face continued ashen, Locke beckoned to the catcher, and ran forward. Oulds, scowling, sour, sullen, met him five feet in front of the pan.

"Give me that ball," said Locke, taking it from the catcher's hand. "Call the curves: a drop or a high inshoot for a strike-out, whichever you happen to know this man is weakest on. I'm going to get him."

"Yes, you are!" sneered Oulds. "Why, you can't—"

"Get ready to catch me," Locke cut him short. "I tell you I'm going to get this man."

Then, seemingly deaf to the continued howling of the crowd, he turned and walked back, apparently disregarding the taunting base runners, who were dancing off the sacks to lure a throw.

Larry Stark, doubtless wondering that Hutchinson had not signaled for a change, stood listless, twelve feet off second; but, without betraying the fact, Locke observed that Jim Sockamore, the Indian center fielder, apparently hoping to work an old trick in the midst of the excitement, was walking swiftly, but unobtrusively, in toward the sack. Indeed, Sockamore was not twenty feet from the bag when the pitcher faced Grady at the plate.

Only for an instant were Locke's eyes turned toward the batsman; like a flash, he whirled again to face second, and the ball shot from his fingers as he turned.

He had not received a signal to throw, but he did so on the chance that the foxy Indian player would sneak all the way to the hassock, if for no other purpose than to show up what might have been pulled off with a live pitcher on the slab.

Sockamore was within five feet of the cushion when Locke turned, and, seeing the ball was com-

ing, he leaped forward. Harney, not a little surprised, lunged back. Like a bullet the scarcely soiled ball sped straight into the eager hands of the young redskin, who met Harney and jabbed it on to him viciously as the Bancroft captain weakly sought to slip under.

The howling of the angry and dissatisfied crowd was instantly cut short. The sudden silence was ruptured by a single hoarse word shot from the lips of the umpire, who had been so surprised that for a moment he had faltered in giving the decision:

“Out!”

The spectators gasped; Harney choked and rumbled weakly. Sockamore grinned into the face of the tricked and chagrined man. At the bench, Henry Cope brought his hand down with a resounding slap upon his thigh, crying jubilantly:

“There! He got him!”

After a few moments of dazed silence, some scattered persons ventured to applaud and cheer faintly, while, apparently struck by the seeming incongruity of the unexpected performance, many others laughed.

“Oh, what an accident!” groaned one of the coaches, as Harney, his face red with mortification, rose to his feet and gave Locke a stare.

"How'd you ever happen to think of it?" sneered the Bancroft captain.

Chuckling, Sockamore threw the ball to the pitcher, and capered back into center field. Harney, his mouth twisted and his cheeks burning, made slowly for the Bancroft bench.

"Accidents will happen," came from a coasher. "Never mind that. Take a constitutional, Wop; he'll accommodate ye."

Grady idled at the pan, laughing silently over the discomfiture of his captain. He was still idling when Locke, seeing Oulds ready, shot over a scorcher that clipped the inside corner.

"Strike!" declared the umpire.

"What's that? What's that?" cried the coasher. "It can't be poss-i-bill? Another accident!"

Surprise was general, but still, like the coasher, the spectators on the bleachers and in the stand fancied it related in a way to something "accidental," and not one in a hundred thought it probable that the left-hander could put over another without wasting several.

Oulds, wondering, called for an out-drop, but Locke, knowing the batter had not yet been egged into a condition that would make him easy to "pull," shook his head. The signal was changed

to one requesting a straight drop, and the pitcher swung into a snappy, quick delivery.

The ball seemed to be too high, and not looking for the despised twirler to "put much on it," Grady permitted himself to be caught again. Down past his shoulders shot the sphere, to the instant croaking of "Strike tuh!" from the umpire.

"Hey, hey! What's comin' off here?" bel-
lowed an uncoated, unshaven, collarless man back
of first base. "Lightnin's hit agin in the same
place."

CHAPTER IX

SOME PITCHING!

THERE was a change in the aspect of the crowd and its behavior, for this was more like something worth while, and a few were beginning to think it possible they might have underestimated the ability of the southpaw slabman. Yet, lost confidence had not been wholly restored, and they waited to see what the final result would be, the Kingsbridgers silent, the Bancroft crowd still laughing and scoffing.

“Never mind, Wop,” called the coacher at third. “He can’t do it agin. If he does, give it a ride. Come on, Trollop; git off that mattress—tear yourself free. On your toes! Ready to scorch if Wop biffs it. Git away, away, away off! More than that! I’ll watch the ball. Come on! Come on!”

Locke drove Trollop back to the sack once, following which he quickly pitched the third ball to Grady. He had a way of throwing every one in almost precisely the same manner, which prevented a batter from judging what was coming by

his style of delivery. It looked like another high one that might turn into a drop, but it proved to be a fancy inshoot, and Grady, doing his prettiest to connect, made a clean miss.

“Y’u’re out!” barked the umpire.

Then the crowd did cheer, for, in amazing contrast to the manner in which he had opened up, Tom Locke had whiffed Grady without wasting one.

Henry Cope poked the silent Hutchinson in the ribs. “What’d I tell ye? What’d I tell ye?” he spluttered delightedly. “Now I guess you’ll see I ain’t such a bonehead in pickin’ pitchers. I played this game myself once.”

“Wait,” said the manager without a flutter, or the slightest variation of intonation. “Strikin’ out one man that’s looking to walk don’t make a pitcher. He’s got to show me more’n that.”

“He’ll show ye, all right,” asserted Cope. “I knew what he c’d do.”

Gus Mace followed Grady at the pan. The right fielder of the Bullies, he was regarded as their heaviest hitter, and his batting the year before had caused the Kingsbridgers to groan with grief. He was boiling over with confidence as he faced Locke, but, getting a signal from Riley, he let the first one pass, in order that Trollop, grown

weary of camping on first, might try to steal.

It was a strike, and Oulds winged it to second in the effort to nail the runner, who had made a flying start and was burning up the ground. Trollop slid, spikes first, and Stark, who seemed to have him nipped, dropped the sphere in the attempt to avoid those spikes and tag the man at the same time. Trollop was safe.

"Now's the time, Mace!" cried the coacher back of third. "Hit it out. Give it a long sail, and let Andy walk home." He had dropped his chatter about waiting for a pass.

Mace gripped his trusty war club and waited, crouching a little. It was plain that the Kinks' new pitcher had recovered his control, and the batter meant to hit anything that came across. He struck left-handed, and the next one pitched looked good to him. It dragged him almost across the pan, and he did not even foul it lightly.

A sharp yell went up from the once-more vibrant and excited crowd, but this time it was a yell of satisfaction. Choking, agitated men began to predict that Lefty would fan Mace, also.

"If he does," said one, "I'm goin' to throw a fit right here! I'll own up honest that I'm the biggest fool that ever barked like a sore-eared pup at a good man."

The Bancrofters were still trying hard to rattle Locke, but now, absolutely cool, self-possessed, and confident, he gave no more heed to their racket than he might to the buzzing of a single fly. There was something in his clean-cut face, his steady eyes, firm mouth, and deliberate manner which proclaimed him absolute master of himself, and predicted that he also would show himself master of the situation.

Oulds, his confidence completely restored, grinned through the meshes of the wire mask. "I reckon you was jest monkeyin' with 'em boy," he said. "They'll all look alike to ye from now on. This one's jest as easy as any."

And so it proved, for Big Mace slashed again, and found nothing but empty air; whereupon the Kingsbridge crowd rose in a body and roared a splendid salvo for the man they had been reviling and threatening a short time before.

As that burst of applause died away, a Neapolitan laborer, standing on the bleachers, his shirt open at the throat, the oily, blue-black hair of his bared head shining in the sun, his kindled eyes almost popping, and his teeth flashing like scimitars, shook his grimy fists in the air, and screamed:

"What's-a da mat' with-a da Lefty?"

The answer was a great shout of laughter, and

another hearty round of applause, which told how suddenly and completely the humor of that recently raging and reviling assemblage had altered. He whom a few minutes before they were deriding and threatening, had, by his amazing performance, become the admired idol of the moment, the Horatius at the bridge, the Moses to find the promised land.

They were more than willing to accept him as king of warriors and savior of wilderness wanderers, but to retain his scepter he must still further demonstrate his prowess in battle or his ability to smite a dry-shod pathway across a mythical Red Sea.

CHAPTER X

A PITCHERS' BATTLE

AS Locke walked calmly toward the bench he found Captain Stark at his side, laughing. "You pulled outer that hole in great shape, old man," said Larry; "but you sure had us all leery to start with. I reckoned you was plumb up in the air."

"I was," admitted the pitcher unhesitatingly; "but I managed to get my feet under me after a while."

His face was no longer pale; the color had returned to his cheeks, and a flickering smile played at the corners of his fine mouth.

Henry Cope, beaming, made room for the players on the bench. "I knowed it," he said. "I tole 'em so."

Having unemotionally watched the new pitcher approach, Manager Hutchinson spoke to Stark. "See if you can't start something right away," he directed. "Mebbe we'll get 'em going if we score the first time up."

Larry nodded, and whispered hastily to the

leading batter, Labelle, a slim, shifty French Canadian, a heady single hitter, and an unusually fast man on the sacks. Labelle grinned, and found his bat.

Possibly the Bancroft manager was more disgusted than disappointed, as the sarcastic comments which he flung at his offending players seemed to indicate; but as yet he had not been aroused to apprehension concerning the ultimate outcome of the game, and he felt that, were the Kinks' left-hander really formidable, it had well happened that his men had been forwarned thus early in the contest.

Having relieved his feelings by a flaying fling at Mace, as the final victim of Locke's skill secured his fielding mitt from the bench, Riley cast aside the remnants of his cigar, lighted a fresh weed, and prepared to watch Jock Hoover make monkeys of the locals.

Janet Harting was overjoyed. "Oh, wasn't that splendid!" she cried, impulsively squeezing her companion's arm with one gloved hand. "It was *such* a surprise! I never expected it."

"No more did any one, I fancy," said King, laughing. "It's the unexpected that so frequently happens which makes baseball the fascinating game it is. Apparently that fellow can

pitch some, after all. I wonder where he came from."

"Mr. Cope won't tell, and nobody around here seems to know."

"Somehow I have a feeling that I've seen him before, but I can't place him."

"Perhaps he's some great college pitcher," said the girl.

"I don't know about that, but if he is I reckon he's here under a fake name; for you know it makes college twirlers professionals to play for money. A man is barred if he's ever caught at it. Just the same, some of them, needing the dough, take the risk. Up here in this league a man would stand a fair chance of getting by without being exposed."

"It's—it's supposed to be dishonest, isn't it?"

"Yes; but necessity has driven more than one good man to shut his eyes to that phase of the matter. If this Locke was known at all as a professional, some of the players of this league should recognize him."

"I don't like to think that he's a college man who would do such a thing," said Janet earnestly.

"Oh-ho!" cried Bent. "So you're taking considerable interest in the chap you thought couldn't pitch at all."

"Well," she faltered, "he—he looks clean and honest. One can see he isn't like the others—the most of them, anyway. Kingsbridge is going to bat now. I hope they can do something."

Hoover had shaken the kinks out of his arm by two or three throws to first, and, glancing round to make sure his backers were in position and ready, he stepped on to the slab and glowered at Labelle. Squatting, Bangs signaled, and the fire-eating twirler swung into his first delivery.

Although a "waiter," with an excellent eye, Labelle seldom permitted himself to pass up the first one if it came over the rubber, and he sought to land on Hoover's corner-cutting slant. The resulting foul counted against the batter as a strike.

"That's a nibble; take a bite," shouted a coacher.

Labelle stamped his spikes into the ground, and squared himself again, unruffled. Hoover leered at him vindictively. The crowd rooted.

CHAPTER XI

ON THE RAW EDGE

TWO balls followed swiftly, the batter ignoring them both, although with every nerve taut.

"Got to put 'em over, Jocko," called the coacher. "You can't pull that little Canuck."

Hoover handed up a "spitter," and Labelle missed cleanly.

"He never could touch you," chuckled the first baseman.

"You've got his measure," declared the short-stop.

"Give him another in the same place," urged the guardian of third.

"Oh, let him hit," begged the center fielder. "He won't get it out of the diamond."

Again, and once again, the Canadian fouled; and then Hoover caught him with a deceptive slant for another clean miss, and Labelle retired, disappointed.

Stark came next, and, like the leading sticker, his best efforts resulted only in weak fouls, the

Bully on the slab finally sending him back to the bench by the whiff route, to the loud acclaim of the admiring Bancrofters on the bleachers.

"They'll never locate you to-day, Jock," shouted one of these. "Show up their southpaw wizard. Make a record."

Reddy Crandall proved to be quite as easy as his predecessors, and Hoover finished his first turn with the third straight strike-out, not even seeming to hear the wild applause of his admirers as he sauntered, sour and unsmiling, to the bench.

More than one of those admirers, even while fulsome with praise, had sometimes felt a strong desire to kick the ungrateful, egotistical, pugnacious star slabman of the champions, who, among his browbeating teammates, even, was not much courted for his society off the field.

Riley, the only person who never praised or flattered him, had discovered some secret process of holding him in check and making him of inestimable value to the team.

"Now, you fellers," growled the Bancroft manager, speaking with the cigar between his teeth, "I want ye t' go after this left-handed dub, and chaw him up. Put the willer to him, and break his heart. You had him almost out when

you slipped a cog t'other time. Git to first, McGovern, and th' boys will push ye round."

"I'll make the sack somehow," promised McGovern, as he started out with his big bat, conquest in his heart.

Exactly thirty-two seconds later Pat McGovern came back to the bench, fanned, having found his left-handed position at the plate most disadvantageous in batting against the Kinks' southpaw. Riley was growling throatily as Otto Bernsteine went forth to pit his wits and skill against the brains and cleverness of Tom Locke.

To tell the truth, Bernsteine, although usually phlegmatic and unemotional, was worried; for he, also, hit left-handed, and he had begun to believe that the Kingsbridge twirler was a terror to batters who stood at the plate in that manner. His worriment was justified; Locke got him, also.

The uproar of the crowd drowned the remarks of one Michael Riley, manager of the Bancrofts; and this may have spared the nerves of any sensitive person in his immediate vicinity. "Hey, Lisotte," he snarled at the shortstop, who was the next in line, "bunt the ball. D'ye hear? Bunt, an' try to beat it out. You bat wrong, too, and ye can't hit him fair. He's got the Injun sign on you off-side sluggers."

Lisotte did his best, but the first ball he bunted rolled foul, and the next he tried for, being close and high, was missed completely. Fearing to try another bunt, he finally swung after one that came slanting over, and missed that also.

The best stickers of the Bullies had faced Locke in two innings, and not one had obtained as much as a scratch single off him; realizing which, the local crowd had spasms of many sorts. With faith completely restored, the Kingsbridgers were telling one another exultantly that, at last, the man had been found to hold the hated enemy in check. Visions of the Northern League pennant waving over their grand stand at the finish of the season already danced before their eyes.

The Bancrofters, although saying that the game was young, and pretending their confidence was as great as ever, were really suffering the qualms of apprehension, all the more intense and disturbing because of the early elation they had felt.

When Kingsbridge's Italian right fielder, Tony Anastace, opened the second for the locals with a clean safety, this rejoicing on one side and apprehension on the other was redoubled.

But Jack Hinkey popped to the infield, Anastace was slaughtered trying to purloin second,

and Fred Lace lifted a high foul back of third for Wop Grady to smother, squaring things up with not a count for either side.

Although Locke, feeling that he had the confidence of his teammates at last, seemed to take it easier, a measly scratch single was all Bancroft could find him for in the third; and, with Hoover hitting a two-minute clip in the last of the same inning, even the least astute spectator understood that it was practically certain to be a pitchers' battle right through to the finish.

With the passing of the innings, and the failure of his teammates to score, Hoover steadily became more savage in the box. At times, under cover of the shouting of the crowd, he insulted the batters with venomous, blood-tingling words.

Contrary to his usual practice, he sought the privilege of going on to the coaching line, where his sneers and slurs were of a nature that aroused protests from the crowd, and finally forced Riley to keep him on the bench when he was idle.

Locke opened the sixth by fanning Trollop, Grady, and Mace, one after another; and then, in the final half, he came first to bat for Kingsbridge.

"Get back off the pan, you peanut-headed sample of nature's carelessness," rasped Hoover,

ready to pitch. "Get back, or I'll take a rib outer yer!"

"I'm in my box," returned Locke calmly. "Pitch the ball, sorehead."

With a murderous expression, Hoover scorched one straight at his rival, and Tom barely escaped being hit by a most amazing, lightninglike dodge. This brought the Kingsbridge crowd up howling wrathfully, and Locke, recovering his position at the pan, cried loudly enough for Hoover to hear:

"Try it again, old boy—try it again, and they'll be coming after you with war clubs and scalping knives."

Captain Harney ran out and grabbed Hoover. "Keep your head, Jock—keep your head," he begged. "He's won the crowd. He's got 'em with him. You'll start a fight that'll mean busted heads if you hit him on purpose."

Already two constables, wearing their badges displayed, were having their hands full to keep back a few hot-headed ones, who seemed eager to charge upon the diamond to reach Hoover.

CHAPTER XII

THE "SQUEEZE PLAY"

IN a town like Kingsbridge, such a movement meant a general stampede, followed by a riot, in which more than one participant would "get his."

Harney continued to talk to Hoover until the raging pitcher, the freckles on his face seeming to stand out like innumerable islands in a grayish sea, promised to behave. The umpire seemed practically helpless.

Locke had waited quietly. He gripped his bat, and squared away as he saw Hoover making ready. The ball came over the outside corner with a shoot, and Tom met it. It was a beautiful, clean single into right field.

The crowd was still roaring when Labelle rushed forth to the pan, signaling that he would attempt a sacrifice. Locke was on his toes, and ready, and he started as Hoover began his short delivery. True to his signaled promise, the Canadian dropped a bunt in front of the pan, thus easily giving the runner ahead of him second, al-

though he himself was cut down in his last jump for first.

With one out, a runner on second, and Captain Larry Stark ready to wield the willow, the local crowd whooped it up like crazy Indians at a ghost dance, believing Kingsbridge had its chance to score.

It was plain that the new pitcher, besides being fast on his feet and ready to take chances, had the faculty of leaping away almost at top speed with his first stride or two, and a long, clean single might enable him to score from second.

Hoover knew this, and was inwardly disturbed. Although he had already twice cut Stark down at the pan, previous experiences warned him that, as a batter to advance runners, the cool, heady, sure-eyed Kingsbridge captain was far more dangerous than the heavier-hitting Crandall, who followed him. Therefore, being supported by a sign from the bench, Jock decided to pass Larry, and take his chances with Crandall and Anastace.

First driving Locke back twice to second, but being unable to keep him hugging the cushion, Hoover handed up a wide one with such elaborate method that he betrayed his purpose immediately.

Promptly with the next pitch, something happened: Locke was leaping away toward third

before the ball left Jock's fingers. Grady covered the sack, and Bangs scorched the air with his quick line throw, but the runner slipped under, and was safe by a narrow margin. Bill Harney disputed the decision, while the crowd howled; but the umpire waved him back to first.

Eyes bulging, throats dry, nerves twitching, the Kingsbridge spectators rooted for a run. Some were purple-faced and perspiring; others were pale and cold; all were wrought to the highest pitch of expectation and excitement.

The face of the wrothy Hoover was twisted into a snarl, and, as the ball came back to him, he betrayed momentary indecision.

Immediately Locke caught a signal from Stark, given by the Kingsbridge captain with his back toward third, his attention seemingly focused on the man on the slab, and the runner knew Larry would seek to hit the next pitched ball if he could possibly reach it without stepping out of the box. Crouching like a runner ready for the crack of the starter's pistol, Locke crept off third.

The ball was wide of the rubber, but, reaching far across, Stark found it with the end of his long bat, and tapped it into the diamond, immediately getting away on the jump for first.

Locke had not failed to obey the signal for the

“squeeze,” and he was coming like the wind when the bat and ball met. Hoover forked fruitlessly at the ball as it caracoled past, but it was McGovern who scooped it, and lined it home in hope of nipping the runner.

A blighted hope it was, for the flying man slid safely, and Bangs, recognizing the uselessness of trying to tag him, winged the sphere to first, where it arrived a moment too late to get Stark.

Far better than words, imagination may picture the uproar of that hysterical moment.

Gradually the cheering ceased, and the hoarse and happy Kingsbridgers became semirational. To Stark, in a way, as much credit was due for that finely worked squeeze as to Locke; but it seemed that the name of the latter was on every lip. He had made the play possible by his hit and steal, and the delighted crowd howled blessings at him long after he was seated on the bench.

Locke's manager looked him over unemotionally, and then sent Crandall out to the pan, with instructions. Hutchinson did not believe in spoiling a youngster with praise. Furthermore, the game was far from over, and experience had taught him that the time to count chickens was after the hatching.

One man, at least, was wholly happy; Henry Cope was confident that, after this, his fellow members of the Kingsbridge Baseball Association, who had given him carte blanche to secure a star pitcher, at any price, could not make much protest when they learned that he had contracted to pay Tom Locke one hundred dollars a week and board, a sum far greater than many a minor-league pitcher of promise received.

Janet Harting was delighted beyond words; so delighted, indeed, that her ebullient expressions of joy and unreserved admiration for Locke brought a slight frown to the dark face of Benton King.

There were those, however, who felt no touch of rejoicing.

The Bancroft crowd was silent. Mike Riley sat on the bench, and chewed at his dead cigar, turning only to snarl at Fancy Dyke when the latter called to him anxiously from behind the rail. He had already sneered at his players because of their inability to hit Locke, but there was something of a still more caustic nature awaiting them when they should again assemble at the bench.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LAST STRIKE-OUT

BUT no man on that field felt the sting of the moment as deeply as Jock Hoover, in whose heart hatred for Tom Locke burned like living fire. The wonder and terror of the league, he feared that a blazing sun had risen to eclipse him. The effect upon him was fully apparent when he carelessly let Stark steal second behind his back, which brought upon him the amused scoffing of the Kingsbridgers. Nor did it serve to lessen the bitterness of his soul when, although he still burned the ball over with the sharp slants which an expert "spit artist" commands, Crandall leaned against it for a grasser to right, and Stark, spurred by the shrieking coacher, crossed third, and reached the home plate, adding another tally.

After that, Anastace popped, and Hinkey agitated the air; but the damage was done.

Riley's scathing, acrid arraignment of his batters did no good. Although an error let Mace get to first in the seventh, Locke disposed of the next

three stickers with ease, and apparently without any great exertion.

Hoover returned to the slab in form, and closed the inning with three straight to his credit.

For Bancroft, hope revived when Bangs started the eighth by obtaining a pass, the first to be secured from Locke since the initial inning. Hoover strode out, thirsting for a hit. Had the stab of his eyes been deadly, Tom Locke must have dropped, mortally pierced, in his tracks.

With the head of the list coming up, Riley had called for a sacrifice, and, much as he hated to do it, Hoover sought to obey. He did not even foul the first ball he tried to bunt; but Oulds, in his haste to get Bangs going down, made a bad throw, and the runner reached second base.

“Ah!” thought Jock exultantly. “Now I can hit it out!”

But he could not hit it out, although he did his best. Locke sent him to the bench, fanned and furious.

Harney, however, batted a lingerer into the diamond, and little Labelle eagerly overran it, which put two on the sacks.

It was still a game, and the Bancroft crowd was beginning to froth, while the Kingsbridgers felt their nerves shaking again. With two on, only

one out, and Trollop and Grady to hit, all sorts of things might happen.

What really happened was two strike-outs, which went to the credit of the Kingsbridge south-paw, and made Janet Harting declare she "just wanted to hug him."

Locke was one of Hoover's victims in the eighth, which, however, did not seem to disturb his equanimity in the least, and gave the Bancrofter but poor and unsatisfactory solace. There was no run-getting, and the ninth opened with the Kingsbridgers rooting for Locke to choke it off in a hurry.

The "Bullies" always fought to the finish, and they were in the game to take advantage of anything favorable that might happen. Once more Labelle, who should have easily handled Mace's grounder for an assist, became too eager, and failed to get the ball up cleanly, following with a poor throw that presented the runner with "a life."

Standing, every man Jack of them, the Bancrofters on the bleachers whooped things up desperately. They were disheartened a bit when McGovern hoisted an infield fly, and went to the bench; but they awoke with redoubled energy as

Bernsteine bingled a bone-breaker against Fred Lace's shins, and the third baseman chased it long enough to make fruitless any attempt to get the man.

"Come, Lefty," shouted a Kingsbridger; "you'll have ter do it alone. You ain't gittin' no s'port."

And now, as if he, too, felt the strain of it, and the tension was too much, Tom Locke handed up four balls, and filled the sacks.

"It's the same old story!" shouted Harney from the coaching line. "They've gone to pieces again! We've got 'em! We've got 'em! We win it right here! Old southpaw is making an altitude record! He's gone! He's up out of sight now! He'll never come down! Kill it, Bingo, if he puts one across!"

Kingsbridge was apprehensively silent, taut, and choked with dread; Bancroft howled and screamed like a lot of caged Camorristis. Bangs gripped his club, longing for a two-bagger, or even a long, clean single. Locke took his time, absolutely declining to betray signs of agitation similar to those which had marked his advent upon that field.

"You've got to do it, Lefty!" came entreat-

ingly from the man who had shouted before. "If you fail us now, there'll be a fun'rul after the game."

Locke whipped over a high one.

"Strike!" blared the umpire.

Before Bangs had finished kicking at the decision, the pitcher bent over another.

"Strike tuh!"

"Get against it, Bingo—get against it!" yelled Harney. "Spoil the good ones, anyhow."

Two balls followed. Then came a marvelous drop that Bangs missed by many inches, and Kingsbridge roared, drowning the Bancroft groan.

Jock Hoover had been swinging two bats. He dropped one of them, and walked into the box, stooping a moment to rub his palms on the dry dirt. Never in his life had he desired half as much to get a hit, and never had he believed more firmly that he would get one.

"You're the boy, Jock!" shrieked a rooter. "Bring 'em home! Win your own game, old fightin' cock!"

From the opposite side came a different cry:

"He's your meat, Lefty! Get him, and it's all over! Don't lose him, on your life!"

It was to be the great test. A clean hit would

leave Hoover still supreme in the league; a strike-out would place another far above him. The lips of the Bully at bat curled back from his teeth, and he stood there ready, like a man made of steel springs. With a sort of placid grimness, Locke swung into his delivery.

Hoover fouled the first one into the bleachers.

“Strike!”

“That’s one on him!”

“You’ve got him coming, Lefty!”

“He can’t hit you!”

“You can’t let him hit!”

“Do it again!”

Hoover stamped his spikes into the ground, rooting himself, that the hit might be effective when he landed on the ball. He had felt of the first one; he would straighten the next one out. In fancy, he saw himself cantering over the sacks, with the runners ahead of him scoring, and the Bancrofters splitting their throats. Doubtless a two-bagger would score all three of the runners; and then, even if he did not reach the rubber himself, he would go out there and hold the “Kinks” runless in the last of the ninth. He knew he could do it.

“Ball-1-1!”

Jock sneered at Locke’s teaser. What a chump

the fellow was to think he would reach for anything like that!

"Put one over!" he invited. "You don't dare!"

It came—whistling, high, and taking an inward shoot. Hoover did not graze the horsehide.

"Strike tuh!"

That set the Kingsbridgers off again:

"Get him, Lefty—get him!"

"Oh, you, Lefty!"

"You're the stuff, old boy!"

"Sic him, you wiz!"

"Mow him down!"

"Polish him off!"

"End his suffering, Lefty!"

"Oh, you, Lefty! Oh, you, Lefty!"

Hoover's teeth were grinding together like millstones. Although angered by his failure, he still gripped and held his confidence that he could hit Locke at this time when a hit meant so much; for, as a pinch hitter, he had an enviable record.

Another shoot came over. Jock hit it. But again the ball went into the bleachers, causing the umpire to stop the base runners with a bellow:

"Foul!"

"That's the best he can do, Lefty! He's going! He's almost gone!"

There was a delay. Some one had pocketed the ball, and presently a spotless, fresh one was tossed out to Locke.

"Where'll that one go when he hits it?" yelled a Bancrofter.

"When he hits it!" mocked a Kingsbridger.
"He never will!"

Leaning forward to get Oulds' signal, Locke gave his head a shake. The sign for a drop was instantly changed to one calling for an inshoot, and the young pitcher lost no time.

There was a white streak in the air, and the ball almost seemed to twist round Hoover's neck, slightly grazing the bat close to his knuckles as he swung. Into Oulds' big mitt it plunked.

"Y're out!" was the cry of the umpire, as he flung his hand upward above his head.

Instantly Hoover called Tom Locke a vile name, and sent the bat, with all the strength of his quivering, muscular arms, spinning straight at the pitcher's head.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER THE GAME

THE indescribable uproar which greeted the strike-out that settled the game prevented Hoover's words from reaching Locke's ears, but the glare in his eyes, the expression of his face, and the movement of his lips told well enough what he said. The triumphant pitcher barely avoided the whistling bat by an agile side spring. In another instant, his face went white; he was coming at Hoover with a rush.

Tense with excitement, Janet Harting saw it all; she saw the steady, youthful, almost boyish, Kingsbridge pitcher fool the Caliban-faced Bully for the final fruitless slash which settled the game, two to nothing, in the home team's favor; saw Hoover, snarling, hurl the bat; and then beheld a swirling rush of shouting, wrathful human beings, who smashed the restraining rails in front of the bleachers, and poured upon the field like a spring flood from a bursted reservoir.

"I think," said Benton King, gathering the

reins, "that it is time for me to take you away from here, Janet."

Trembling, she grasped his arm. "No, no!" she cried. "What are they going to do? That wretch threw his bat at—at Lefty."

"Yes; and he'll get his, if his friends don't look out for him well. Locke has got all Kingsbridge behind him, and they're a tough bunch when they get good and mad. There's likely to be some broken heads."

"Oh, wait a moment!" she entreated. "Look! They're trying to hold the crowd off, and I believe Lefty is helping them."

Out there on the diamond, raging, frothing men were shaking their fists at the offending pitcher; while others, including a number of Kingsbridge players, having packed themselves round the threatened man, were holding the hot-heads back by main force. And it was true that Tom Locke was one of those who sought to protect Jock Hoover from the wolfish mob.

"Stop!" his voice rang out, clear and distinct. "Keep back! The trouble is between that man and me. We'll settle it."

"Let-a me git at-a him!" raged an Italian, the same who had amused the crowd after the striking out of Mace in the first inning, by asking what

was the matter with Lefty. "He throw-a da bat! I knock-a da block off-a da sneak-a!"

His cigar gone, his hat smashed, his collar torn awry, Mike Riley succeeded in reaching Hoover.

"You infernal idiot!" he puffed. "Didn't you know better? What made ye do it?"

"Bah!" retorted Jock with contempt and courage worthy of a better cause. "These barking curs won't do anything. Give me a show, and I'll break that left-handed dub's face. He hasn't got the courage to give me an opportunity right now—here. He's a——" The concluding epithet was a repetition of the insult he had hurled at Locke along with the bat.

"No man can swallow that!" muttered Larry Stark. "Somebody must fight that miserable rowdy."

"Give me the chance," said Tom Locke, "and give him the same even show, without interference. Let the crowd keep back." They marveled at his calmness.

Some of Hoover's friends sought to rush him off, against his will, and the vociferous, twisting, lunging mass of humanity swept over to one side of the diamond, where Bent King had his hands full in the task of restraining his fretting span from plunging forward and trampling some of

them. King had listened to Janet's appeal, and dallied a few moments too long; now they were caught in the midst of the mob that packed close on all sides. Two men, taking note of his difficulty, grasped the horses by the bits; but the crowd, seemingly deaf and oblivious to everything except the imminent fist fight, could not be induced to make way.

"I'm sorry, Janet," said the lumberman's son. "This is no place for you. I was a fool to wait a minute when the trouble began."

"Never mind," she returned, her voice quivering a little, her face quite colorless. "I—I want to see. It isn't right for them to fight; it isn't fair. Lefty can't be a match for that ruffian. Why don't they stop it?"

Not much time was wasted in preparation when it was understood that Locke was ready to meet his challenger. Members of the two teams began pushing the crowd back to make room, begging them to give the men a chance, and a fifteen-foot space was finally cleared. Eager spectators climbed upon the shoulders of those in front of them; the bleachers, at one end, were loaded to the cracking point with human beings; and every stout limb of a near-by tree quickly bore human fruit.

Bareheaded, the men met in the center of the cleared space. Hoover came with a rush, and Locke was not dilatory. Plainly the Bully weighed ten or fifteen pounds more than his slender antagonist, and many a sympathizer with the youth feared the match must prove to be pitifully one-sided.

Jock led, right and left; but the youngster parried, blocked, and countered like lightning, closing in without hesitation. His jaw was set, and he was still cool, while the Bancrofter blazed with all the fury of a conflagration.

The sound of thudding blows caused Janet Harting to drop her parasol, which she had closed; her hands went up to her heart, and her lips were parted that she might breathe, the open air seeming close and smothery.

CHAPTER XV

MAN TO MAN

IT was a scene to be printed indelibly on the memory: The palpitant, swaying crowd, those in front pushed forward by those behind; the baseball players round the edges of the cleared space, bracing to hold the mob back almost by main strength; human beings climbing on other human beings to get a momentary glimpse of the fighters; men and boys jammed in a dense mass on the bleachers, and still more of them clinging like monkeys to the bending limbs of the tree—and every face ablaze with the primitive passion of mankind, the savage zest of battle, the barbarous joy of witnessing a sanguinary struggle between two of their specie.

But Janet saw only the fighters; not for a moment did her straining eyes waver or wander. She watched them leap and retreat, meet again, stagger, recover, sway this way and that, all the time turning round and round to the left or to the right, their arms flashing out, their battering fists giving forth sounds now sharp, now sodden,

as they smashed on head or body. She saw the head of the brown-haired youth jerk backward before a blow full on the mouth; and then, as blood stained his lips, a cry—half snarl, half roar—broke from the crowd.

Hoover had drawn first blood, seeing which, an expression of malicious joy contorted his repellent face, and he seemed spurred to still fiercer efforts. He thirsted to leave the stamp of his fists indelibly recorded on that clean-cut face; to mark the youth for life would be an exquisite pleasure, lingering long in aftertaste.

Locke, however, continued to keep his head, improving such openings as he could find or make. A cut lip was of no consequence when he had not felt the blow much; but he must take care that his antagonist did not reach his jaw with a swing like that, having a bit more steam behind it. And he must husband his energy and bide his time, for this was no fight by rounds, and Hoover had set a pace which flesh and blood could not keep up protractedly. In time, he must weary and slacken, and Locke hoped to be ready to make the most of it when this faltering came.

The youth's left-handed guard bothered Jock somewhat, causing him to fret and snarl. Twice

he pinned Locke up against the crowd, that could not make room for his free movement; but once Tom got under his arm and away, and once he met the aggressor with such a sudden storm of blows that Hoover was checked and driven back. After that both men were bleeding, the Bully having received a stiff smash on the nose.

The crowd shouted applause and instruction:

“Fine work, Lefty!”

“Keep after him, Jock! Put him out!”

“You’ve got him going! Follow him up!”

“Look out for his left, boy!”

“Soak him another in the same place—that’s the stuff!”

“Well,” said Bent King, in wonderment, “I’ll be hanged if Locke isn’t holding his own with that terrier!”

Apparently Janet did not hear him. A little color had risen into her cheeks, and her bosom was heaving against her tightly clenched hands. She was still fearful of the final result, but he with whom her throbbing heart sympathized had met his brutal enemy like a man of courage, and made it a worthy battle. She could hear Hoover breathing heavily, like one on whom the tremendous strain was beginning to tell at last, while

Locke, although his breast rose and fell rapidly, was, to all outward seeming, the fresher of the two.

Once a little, choking gasp escaped her, for the youth was sent reeling by a blow, Jock rushing forward to follow it up. Locke, however, kept his feet with the agility of a cat, avoiding that rush, and getting in a body punch that made the other man grunt.

Following this, discovering at last the drain his efforts were putting upon him, Hoover sought to take it easier, and recuperate. This quickly became apparent, and a cry arose:

"He's stalling, Lefty! Go to him! Don't let him get his wind back!"

Locke had no intention of permitting his antagonist to rest, and now he took the aggressive, and kept at it with persistence that wore on Hoover.

Up to this point, Mike Riley had entertained no doubt as to what the end must be, but now uncertainty seized him, followed by alarm as he beheld tokens which seemed to denote that Hoover was becoming a bit groggy.

The Bancroft manager had no wish to see his puissant slabman whipped, for that would leave him no longer the terror he had been to opposing

batsmen; and much of his success as a pitcher had doubtless come through the awe which he had inspired.

"Hey!" croaked Riley suddenly. "I guess this here's gone 'bout fur enough."

But, with his first movement to interfere, he was seized by more than one pair of hands, jerked back, and held.

"Guess again!" cried Larry Stark. "Hoover forced it on the boy, and now he'll have to take his medicine."

"That's right! That's right!" shouted half a hundred voices.

"You bet it's right!" roared a big millman in the crowd. "If this Bancroft bunch tries to meddle now in a square fight, they'll have the whole o' Kingsbridge on top of 'em."

Possibly a free-for-all fight might have broken out at this point, but suddenly Tom Locke's fist fell on Hoover's jaw with a crack like a pistol report, and the Bancroft pitcher's legs seemed to melt beneath him.

Prone upon the trampled ground he sank in a huddled heap, while Locke, lowering his hands at his sides, stepped back and stood looking down at him. A hush came over the crowd. The fallen man made a blind, feeble effort to lift himself,

turned his body partly, then slumped back, his face in the turf, and lay still.

"He's put Jock out!" said some one in an awed and marveling voice.

With a yell, Larry Stark leaped forward and seized the victor's hand. That yell was echoed by the mob.

"Lefty did it!"

"Oh, you, Lefty! Oh, you, Lefty!"

Locke's face was sober and unsmiling, betraying no elation. Satisfied that it was really over, he lifted his eyes, and found himself unexpectedly gazing into the wide blue eyes of a girl who was looking down at him from a carriage round which the crowd was wedged. For a moment they stared at each other, while the cheering continued, and slowly a flush of shame mounted into Tom Locke's cheeks. He turned away.

"Come, Bent," said Janet in a husky voice, "can't we get out of here now? I'm really faint. Please hurry."

CHAPTER XVI

BENTON KING AWAKENS

JANET was pale and silent as King drove into town. Glancing at her, he saw that her lips were pressed together, her smooth brow puckered a bit, and her eyes filled with a strange, thoughtful expression. Her hands tightly gripped the handle of her parasol.

"I'm sorry it happened that way, Janet," he said apologetically. "It was thoughtless of me to get caught in that mob, so that you were compelled to suffer the humiliation of witnessing such a brutal spectacle."

"You were not to blame," she returned, in a low, queer voice. "I begged you to wait. I'm glad I did."

"You're what—glad?" he exclaimed, astonished. "It was not a thing for a girl like you to see and hear."

"Still," she declared, "I am glad I saw it. I know now that any man with an atom of manhood in his make-up may sometimes be compelled to fight."

"That's right," he agreed, "and he can't always pick a gentleman, or a man of his own class, for an antagonist."

She looked at him quickly. "Do you think Tom Locke is a gentleman?"

"Oh, I don't know about that; it's doubtful, considering the company he's with."

"Do gentlemen never play baseball?"

"Certainly—in college games."

"But they *never* play professionally?"

"I wouldn't say that, you know," was his slow answer. "Some college men go in for professional baseball after graduating. Almost always, they need the money to give them a start in some chosen profession or business. But not all college players are gentlemen, by any means; far from it. At Harvard, even though baseball and football players and members of the track team were decidedly popular in a general way, there were none of them in my set, and I didn't see fit to associate with them much."

Even as he said it, he flushed a bit, knowing she, like many others in Kingsbridge, must be fully aware of the fact that his exasperated father had removed him from Harvard in his sophomore year to avoid the disgrace of his suspension, or possible expulsion, because of certain wild esca-

pades in which he had been concerned, along with some others of his own particularly swift set. Nevertheless, he had his standards of deportment and qualifications essential to the gentleman, though, doubtless, it would be no easy matter to make them clear to some strait-laced, narrow-minded persons.

He was nettled by the conviction that Janet was suddenly taking altogether too much interest in the practically unknown Kingsbridge pitcher, who, following his surprising double victory of the day, was surely destined to become a popular idol in the town. He had known Janet three years, having met her at a church sociable in the days when Cyrus King was setting about in earnest, by the construction of his mills, to turn Kingsbridge from a dull, sleepy settlement into a hustling, chesty town. At first she had seemed to be an unusually pretty, vivacious little girl, with somewhat more refinement and good sense than the usual run of country maidens; but that he would ever become genuinely and deeply interested in her had not occurred to him as a remote possibility. Even after he had left college and begun work in the big sawmill, although he found her much matured and developed, and therefore still more interesting, he but slowly came to realize

that she was the possessor of some potent charm, indefinite, elusive, indescribable, which was casting a powerful spell over him.

Not until this day, however, had he realized how firmly this spell had gripped him. It had come upon him as a surprise which he obstinately tried to misinterpret; for why should he, the only son and heir of old Cy King, several times over a millionaire, permit himself to be bewitched past self-mastery by this little country girl, daughter of a broken-down village parson, who had not tried to bewitch him at all? It seemed ridiculous, something to demand self-reproach; for, least of all, when he thought of such a thing, which was rarely, had he fancied himself silly enough to be caught in such a net. Moreover, he knew what stormy anger the knowledge would produce in his father if the knowledge ever came to him.

The truth had stabbed him there upon the baseball field. It had taken the piercing form of a jealous pang, which he had sought to conceal when he saw that Janet was becoming interested in the new Kingsbridge pitcher; and it cut deeper and deeper as her interest grew and developed into out-spoken admiration. He had seen her watching that fierce fist fight, knowing all the while that she was praying that Locke might con-

quer, and, though she had held herself marvelously in hand, he seemed to fathom all the torture and dread which filled her heart. That she should care so much what might happen to a total stranger, even though he were the new-found idol of the Kingsbridge fans, was sufficient to skim the scales swiftly from Benton King's eyes, and leave him confessing to himself, without shame, that she was very dear to him. For, trite but true, that which we desire very much becomes a thousand times more desirable as our chance of possession grows less.

And now, as they drove slowly homeward, something writhed and burned within him at the further evidence of her interest in Locke. He was tempted to speak up boldly and say that there was not one chance in a million that the fellow could be a gentleman; but he had not yet lost his head, even if his heart was gone, and he had sense enough to know that such a course might be the most unwise one he could pursue. So he held himself in check, registering an inward vow that he would see to it that this fellow Locke found as little chance as might be to give him worriment over Janet.

Too soon the little parsonage, a modest story-and-a-half house, one of the oldest in Kingsbridge,

came into view. Too soon they were at the door, and he was helping her to alight. He held her hand to the extreme limit of good taste, held it and pressed it, saying:

"I shall be at church to-morrow. If you don't mind, it would give me pleasure to escort you home after the services."

She looked at him in surprise, her lips parted in an odd little smile, her violet eyes emphasizing her wonderment.

"Why, Bent, you've scarcely attended church half a dozen times since you came home from college. What brings you out to-morrow?"

"You!" he answered, feeling himself thrill and choke a bit. "I'm a heathen, I admit; but I'm coming out to-morrow to worship—you." He had said such things before, to other girls, but he had spoken them lightly, and without a tremor; now little electric vibrations were running along his nerves, and, though he knew that his face was pale, he could feel his swollen heart pulsing hard, and his temples drumming. He had never dreamed that saying such a "little thing" to a pretty girl would come so near unmaning him.

Her surprise had grown, but she was self-possessed. "Thou shalt not worship false gods," she laughed. Then, as if she saw something in his

eyes which made her fear he would go further, she hastily gave her consent: "If you come out to church to-morrow I'll permit you to walk home with me—after Sabbath School. That'll be your reward for listening to father's sermon. Now, for the first time in my life, I feel that I have really done something for the heathen."

Laughing, she ran up the steps of the trellised porch, turning a moment to say good night, framed in an arch of June green vines. Head bared, he gazed at that picture, and found it the fairest his eyes had ever looked upon. There was now in his mind no question, no doubt; he knew.

"Good night, Janet," he said softly. "Until to-morrow, and that will be—a year." He had laughed at silly, lovesick chaps who said things like that; but now, before he knew what he was saying, he had uttered it with all the sincerity of his soul.

CHAPTER XVII

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

THE door of the Reverend John Harting's study was open. In the softened afternoon light which came from the window above his desk, he sat, giving his morrow's sermon the last polishing touches. But when Janet would have slipped past, he heard her light footstep, and called to her. She stopped at the door.

"Come in, my dear," he said, lifting his spectacles to his forehead, and turning from the outspread pages of manuscript. "Would you mind sitting down a moment? I have something I wish to say to you."

He spoke precisely and formally, and even in ordinary conversation he had a touch of that singsong intonation which all old-time ministers affected. A fringe of white locks, carefully combed, added to the somewhat stern, but almost patriarchal, expression of his angular, deeply lined face. It was the fearless face of a good-hearted man, and yet there was something about it indicative of narrowness and bigotry. Such a

face, one fancied, might have belonged to a leader of martyrs.

She came to him, and sat upon the arm of his chair, encircling his neck, and patting his cheek.

“Now, father, dear,” she laughed coaxingly, “I hope you’re not going to scold. I know you didn’t want me to go to the ball game, but I was just dying to go, and Benton invited me, and—”

“He came round here, and cajoled me into consenting, against my will. He is a young man with a most persuasive and flattering tongue.”

“I’ll not dispute you,” she said, thinking of those parting words at the door. “He needed a persuasive tongue to win you over, you are so dreadfully set against baseball. You can’t seem to realize that the game itself is really harmless and clean, and two-thirds of the people of this town are crazy over it. They’ll be crazier still after to-day, for we beat Bancroft—shut ’em out without a single tally, gave ’em nine beautiful goose eggs. What do you think of that, father?”

He looked a bit puzzled. “What have goose eggs to do with baseball, my dear?”

“Oh,” she laughed, “I mean to say that we handed them a beautiful coat of whitewash, and we bingled out a couple of merit marks for our-

selves. The crowd just went crazy when our new southpaw slant artist started the fireworks going in the sixth with a clean wallop, moved up a peg on a sacrifice, pilfered the third hassock, and slid home on a beautiful squeeze that gave us our first count, and—”

“Stop, Janet!” he cried, bewildered. “What are you talking about?”

“Why, baseball, daddy! I’m simply telling you how we won the game.”

“You may be trying to tell me, but you are not doing it simply. ‘Coat of whitewash,’ ‘bingle,’ ‘southpaw slant artist,’ ‘clean wallop,’ ‘third hassock,’ ‘beautiful squeeze’! My dear, it’s dreadful for a young lady to use such language. It is ample evidence of the absolutely demoralizing influence of this game called baseball.”

She laughed still more gayly, and again patted his cheek caressingly. “That’s simply the idiom of the game, which every true fan understands.”

“But you should remember that I am not a true fan, whatever that may mean. I abhor slang, especially from the lips of a refined girl. You know my efforts alone last year prevented the desecration of the Sabbath by this dreadful game, which seems to turn people’s heads, and is productive of untold strife and bitterness. What

will be thought now when my daughter is seen attending these games?"

"But they are not playing Sunday baseball, daddy, and I agree that you were quite right in bringing your influence to bear against that, though, as I said before, I hold that there is no harm in the game itself."

"There is harm in whatever produces harm, which is sufficient answer to your argument. And look at the class of men who take part in those games. Would you be proud to associate with them? Would you choose them as friends?"

"No," she confessed; "not many of them; but still there are some really decent ones who play. Larry Stark is one. I know him, and I'm not ashamed of it."

"There may be an occasional exception, but you know the old saying that exceptions prove the rule. Once in a while a respectable young man may be led by necessity to make a business of baseball, but I am sure no such young man will long continue to follow it up."

"Respectable people watch the games. Some of the best people in Kingsbridge were there to-day."

"Which denotes a deplorable tendency of the times. And you must not forget that this town

has changed from a peaceful country settlement to a place that is rough and crude, and filled with viciousness and vice. I am having a struggle against these evil influences, and I need the moral support of my daughter's example, at least. If your mother had lived—"

"Now, father, please don't! You seem to have an idea that I'm a most reckless, wicked young person, and you always use that form of argument to shame me in my sinful ways. I saw in the grand stand to-day several of the most respectable ladies in town, at least two of whom are regular attendants at your church."

"Some seed must fall on barren ground. I hope young King will not ask you to go with him again. If he comes to me, I shall refuse my consent; if you go, you will do so against my wishes."

With him in this inflexible mood, she knew the uselessness of persuasion or cajolery, and she left him, to run up to her room a few moments before the maid should call them to tea. Removing her hat before the mirror, she pouted a little at the charming reflection in the glass.

"Father is so set," she murmured; "yet I've always been able to bring him round some way, and I must do it about this; for I just can't stay

away from the games. I guess I'm a real fan, all right, and I'll be worse than ever with Kingsbridge winning from Bancroft, and—and Lefty pitching. He's surely what they can call *some pitcher*. And he can fight—gracious!"

She shivered a bit at the recollection of the scene she had witnessed after the game was over. Again she seemed to behold those fighting men hammering at each other with their bare fists, savage, bloodstained, brutal. She shuddered at the remembered glare of their eyes, the wheezing of their panted breathing, and the crushing sound of their blows. From her parted lips came a little gasp, as once more on her ears seemed to fall the clear crack of Tom Locke's fist smiting his foe full on the point of the jaw with such force that Hoover's legs had given way beneath him like props of straw.

"He can pitch, and he can fight," she whispered. "He looks clean and manly, too. I wonder what he's really like. I suppose he must be coarse and vulgar. When father hears about that affair, he'll be far more set against the game than ever, and he's sure to hear, for the whole town must be talking of it now."

While she made her toilet for tea, the clean-cut, determined face of the young pitcher seemed to

haunt her. Vexed by this, she decided to put him resolutely out of her mind.

"I'm like a silly schoolgirl, seeking a hero to worship," she laughed, blushing at her folly. "I'm old enough to know better. Such heroes always have feet of clay. Still, I'd like to think of him as well as I can—as a pitcher; and, to do so, it is wise that I should view him from afar, that his flaws may not be too apparent. I'll take care about that."

Then her thoughts turned to Benton King, and a little frown gathered upon her face. To-day, as they were driving homeward, and especially as they were saying good night at the door, there had been something in his manner and his words that he had never before unveiled to her. Hitherto they had been just good friends—he deferential, in a way—yet free and easy, as such friends might be, with no self-consciousness or constraint; but now, after this, something warned her that it would be changed, even though, as she believed, he had been neither deep nor sincere in what he had felt or said.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, still frowning; "for I like Bent, and he's about the only young man in Kingsbridge I'd care to be really friendly with. I suppose it's been so long since he's had

an opportunity to talk such nonsense to a girl that he just had to try it on some one to keep in practice. But I don't like it, and I'll have to stop it. Next time he tries it, I'll chaff him till he quits. I'll tell him I like Lefty."

She could not have chosen a more certain method of preventing Benton King from quitting.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

THE sermon was dry and tiresome, old-fashioned and overflowing with "doctrine." John Harting had never made a pretense of sympathizing with the liberality of modern dominies who relied wholly for the saving of souls upon "the message of love." True, he had ceased openly to preach "hell fire," but doubtless he still believed in it, if not as a literal punishment for the sinful hereafter, then as the only adequate synonym of the penalty that should be meted out to the evil-doer who died unregenerate.

He had found that such preaching, instead of attracting and holding congregations, left the pews of the little old church sadly vacant; and the effort to modify his sermons had taken from them the little heart they once possessed, and made them wearisome and soporific.

The day was warm and sunny, and at times faint little grateful breezes, venturing in at the open windows, brought the June odors of flowers, and grass, and green growing things. Birds were

singing in the trees which shaded the church, and away out yonder the river smiled, and the woods beckoned one to cool shadows and mossy glades.

Thoughts of those glades and shadows occupied Janet in her pew far more than thoughts of the sermon. But those were not by any means her only thoughts; once or twice she had ventured an admirably careless and unstudied glance in the direction of two young men who were sitting far over at the side of the church, both of whom were maintaining a commendable and heroic mien of strict attention to the words of the parson.

It was not, however, Larry Stark who had drawn her glances; her eyes had been directed toward the clear profile of Larry's pewmate, concerning whom she was again wondering and conjecturing. On discovering Tom Locke there, she had felt a shock of surprise, yet somehow he did not seem at all out of place, and never was there the faintest token that the experience was for him in any degree novel or unusual.

So absorbed was she in her speculations that presently she was almost startled to find the sermon ended, and to hear her father intoning the first lines of the closing hymn; never before had one of his discourses seemed so short and passed so quickly.

Standing, she sang with the congregation, without recourse to the hymn book. She had a voice that was clear, and sweet, and true, expressive and sympathetic; she was doubly charming when she sang.

In the midst of that hymn she suddenly became self-conscious, and felt the warm color mounting into her cheeks; although she did not see it, intuition or something of the sort told her that *he* had turned to look in her direction.

Following the benediction, she lingered to speak with some near-by friends. Passing down the aisle to the door, she found herself face to face with Stark and Locke, coming across at the rear from the far side. Larry bowed, and she gave him a friendly smile in return.

"I'm glad to see you at our church again this year, Mr. Stark," she said.

"Thank you, Miss Harting," he returned. "I'm afraid I didn't come as often as I should last year. Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Locke, one of our players."

Their eyes met again, but how changed were the circumstances! Still, it was not she alone who remembered, and the flush on his face was no feeble reflection of that upon her own. She murmured something, her lids drooping quickly; in her ears

his voice—strong, fine of timbre, well modulated—sounded pleasantly. She was disturbed by the remarkable behavior of her heart.

Afterward she could not recall what she had said, but she remembered his words accurately. They were few and formal, but they were uttered in that unmistakable way which marks the speech of a man of breeding.

She took particular note of his hands; while they were a bit slender, with long fingers, there was something about them indicative of physical strength, and strength of character, as well. She wondered that a baseball player could have such fine, well-groomed hands; and she had come to believe that the hand of any man tattles the secrets of him to whom it belongs.

After a few moments, the ball players passed out of the church between two lines of children waiting to enter for Sabbath school when the congregation should have departed. Even as she smilingly greeted some of those children, Janet's eyes followed the retreating figure of Tom Locke.

She was a bit startled to hear some one speak to her, and to discover Bent King, hat in hand, at her side. His face was unusually pale, and there was in his eyes something resembling anger. His voice sounded unnatural and harsh.

"I must say those two—er—fellows had their nerve with them!" he observed, in a low tone. "It took a crust for them to stop and speak to you here. I—I felt like punching their heads!"

"I am very glad you did not permit your feelings to master you," she said, with a faint laugh. "I met Larry Stark last year, and I was glad to see him at church to-day. He introduced Mr. Locke, the new pitcher."

"Oh, I saw it all," Bent half growled. "I was standing out here in the vestibule, where I could look inside, and I saw them time their movements to meet you."

"Oh, pshaw! You must be mistaken."

"I'm not—begging your pardon, Janet. I say it was a sheer case of nerve for two hired ball players to do a thing like that. I saw people staring as you were talking to them. I don't wonder you were embarrassed."

"Embarrassed! You must be mistaken, Benton."

"Of course you were embarrassed—you blushed like fire. It was humiliating to be compelled to acknowledge an introduction to a common scrapper like that man Locke."

"I assure you that I did not feel at all humiliated," she returned, with a touch of defiance.

“Instead, I was glad of the opportunity to meet him.”

King choked; the pallor of anger gave way to a flush of the same nature, and he gazed at her resentfully.

“You must be jesting,” he said, endeavoring to restrain himself. “I hope you’re not baiting me.”

“Not at all. Ever since the game yesterday I have felt much curiosity concerning Tom Locke. To some extent, it has been satisfied. I admit I was surprised to find him plainly very much of a gentleman.”

He bit his lip, his gloved hands gripping and crushing the soft felt hat, and for the moment he was afraid to speak again. Hatred for Tom Locke throbbed in every pulse beat.

She broke the momentary silence: “What are you doing here—now?”

“I am waiting to walk home with you.”

“But it is too early. I told you after Sabbath school.”

“I’ll wait,” he said.

“Don’t let me put you to that trouble.”

“I’ll wait,” he repeated grimly.

He was waiting at the door when she came forth after Sabbath school was over, and he fell in at

her side. She made an observation about the beautiful day, but his face wore a shadow, and it was of something quite different that he presently spoke.

"I hope, Janet," he said, "that you are not becoming interested in that man Locke?"

"Oh, but I *am* interested in him," she returned, laughing. "How can I help being? He is a wonderful pitcher, and he has shown that he can take care of himself when crowded into a corner. Every one who has seen him must be interested in him."

"You know what I mean, Janet. He is a professional ball player, a stranger, a man whom no one around here knows anything about."

"Oh, Mr. Cope must know a great deal about him, or he'd never signed him for the team. I'd really like to ask Mr. Cope some questions."

"Don't! If you do that, if you're not careful, you'll have people gossiping. You know how easy it is to start gossip in a small country town."

She tossed her head a bit. "Yes, I know; but if they want to gossip over nothing at all, I'll not attempt to deprive them of the pleasure."

"These baseball players," he went on, "always think they can mash any country girl they choose. I understand that they joke and boast of their conquests, and laugh about the silly girls who

get stuck on them. You should have foresight enough—”

“I beg your pardon, Mr. King!” she interrupted frigidly. “You seem to presume that I’m anxious to pick up a flirtation with a baseball player. I assure you that you are mistaken; but, even if you were not, you could not choose a better method of making yourself offensive.”

He saw he had made a false step; in vain he tried to remedy the error. She would not quarrel, nor would she discuss the matter further, maintaining silence, save when it became absolutely necessary, out of politeness, to make some answer to what he was saying. Cursing himself for a blunderer, he apologized as well as he could, speaking of their long friendship, and his natural interest in her, which might have led any one into such an indiscretion. At the door of the parsonage they parted, he still humble and penitent, she still cool and formal.

“I’m a fool!” he growled as he strode away. “I should have known better. I *did* know better, but I lost my head when I saw him fawning upon her—when I saw her, poppy-cheeked, looking after him. If he takes a fancy to cut in on my preserves, he’ll find the going rough. I’ll guarantee he has a vulnerable spot, and I’ll locate it.”

CHAPTER XIX

THE AGITATION IN BANCROFT

MORE than a hundred men, laborers and mill hands, bearing new brooms, recently bought in grocery stores, and making a tremendous noise with tin horns, cow bells, and voices, were marching down the main street of Bancroft.

They were Kingsbridge fans, who had come down to the city to root for their baseball team, and to back it up, if necessary, should a disturbance start upon the field; and, to the last horny-handed husky, they looked like fellows who would as soon fight as eat; one might have fancied, even, that not a few of them were the sort who would leave a meal any day to take a hand in a healthy, head-cracking scrap.

At any rate, their appearance had been sufficient to serve notice of the cause which had brought them thirty miles by rail on this mid-week day to sit in a bunch on the Bancroft bleachers while the game was in progress.

After the affair in Kingsbridge, which ended with the whipping of Hoover, there had been rumors that the resentful Bancrofters would do things to Locke when he appeared in the city down the river, which had brought out this picked band of Lefty's admirers with the openly proclaimed intention of being concerned in such "doings" as might come off.

The game was over, the Kinks had won again, and there had been no riot. Up to the seventh, it had been another pretty struggle between Locke and Hoover, but when the first Kingsbridger opened that fatal inning with a stinging two-sacker, the local pitcher went up in the air for the first time in the Northern League, being bumped for three earned runs before Manager Riley brought himself to send in a substitute. The game had terminated with the score seven to three in Kingsbridge's favor. Hence the demonstration of the rejoicing visitors, as they marched down through town to take the homeward-bound train.

Mike Riley, chewing at his inevitable cigar, stood on a corner, and sullenly watched the parade. After the game, he had not lingered to say anything to his players, for he knew that his mood would lead him into remarks not at all

soothing or flattering, and mere talk could not remedy what had happened.

Some one grabbed Riley by the elbow, and he looked round, to see Fancy Dyke, accompanied by Rufus Kilgore, a lawyer, who was one of the backers of the Bancroft team. Dyke's thin lips were pressed together, the corners being pulled down into something half sneer, half snarl. The lawyer looked disturbed.

"What're you doing?" asked Fancy. "Standin' here to give them howlin' muckers a chance to see how bad you feel? Where's the police, anyhow? They oughter pinch that whole bunch for disturbin' the peace."

"It would take the whole police force of the city to arrest a single man of them and land him in the caboose," said Kilgore. "Kingsbridge didn't send down a hundred fighting men to see any one of them pinched because he was celebrating a victory over us."

"We was lookin' for you, Riley," said Dyke. "Come on over to Kilgore's office."

"What for?" growled the manager, having drawn back and shaken off Fancy's hand.

"We're goin' to have a consultation; we're goin' to talk this thing over. Jorkins and Butler will be right along. We've told 'em to come."

“What’re you tryin’ to do—make trouble fer me?” rasped Riley resentfully. “You’ve got busy mighty quick after the game, ain’t ye?”

“It’s sure time something was done,” retorted Fancy defensively. “This town won’t stand for much more of the medicine it had to swaller to-day.”

“That’s right,” agreed the lawyer. “Everybody is sore over it. To be downed by Fryeburg or Lakeport would be bad enough, but to have Kingsbridge rub it into us—oh, blazes!”

“I don’t s’pose you guys got an idea I’m goin’ to lay down and let the Kinks keep it up right along?” snapped the manager. “I reckoned you knew I warn’t built that way.”

“It won’t do any hurt to talk over what’s to be done,” said Dyke. “Come on!”

Riley followed them, scowling blackly. They crossed the street along which the hilarious Kingsbridgers had passed, came to an open doorway two blocks farther on, and mounted a rather dark flight of stairs. Kilgore jingled a bunch of keys attached to a chain, and opened a door bearing his name lettered upon it, at the head of the stairs.

The office consisted of two uncarpeted rooms, the front and larger having windows which looked upon the street. The lawyer flung open one of

those windows, through which drifted distant and dying sounds of the celebrating Kingsbridgers. Then he motioned his companions to chairs, himself taking the swivel in front of his littered, untidy desk.

"Had to let my stenographer off for the game," he said. "She made a bluff that she was half sick and had a terrible headache, but I knew what ailed her, and I cured her by giving her a pass. She'll come back to-morrow feeling worse than ever over our licking."

"Natural enough," said Dyke, sitting down. "It'll make the whole town sick."

Riley's chair cracked under his weight. "Ain't got a swaller of somethin' round here, have ye, Kilgore?" he asked.

The lawyer produced a "longnecker" and a dirty glass. "Running water in the back room if you want it," he said.

But the manager, having no desire to dilute the amber liquid with which he almost overran the glass, and disdaining a "chaser," took his "straight." Dyke followed with a small "nip," but Kilgore asked to be excused from joining them, and put away the bottle and glass.

Heavy steps sounded on the stairs. A tall, slim, sallow man entered, a puffing, red-faced, rolypoly

individual toddling at his heels. These were Timothy Jorkins and Ira Butler, both financial backers of the team, and members of the Bancroft B. B. A.

"Here you are!" said Jorkins, in a deep voice pregnant with accusation, fixing his eyes on Riley.

"Yes, here you are!" gurgled Butler, likewise glaring at the manager.

"Yes, here I am," rasped Mike, returning their gaze. "What about it?"

"What about it?" rumbled the tall man excitedly. "Do you say what about it? Have you the nerve to say what about it? We are the ones to say that. What about it, Mr. Riley; what about it?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Riley, what about it?" wheezed the fat man, digging up a limp handkerchief, and painfully mopping around inside his collar, his face becoming still more beetlike during the process. "That's what we want to know."

Riley removed the cigar from his mouth, and spat on the floor. "You're all wrought up, ain't ye?" he sneered. "Goin' to jump on me good and hard, hey? There's some poor losers in this burg."

"Bancrofters'll never stand losing to Kingsbridge," declared Jorkins. "You were dead cer-

tain their left-hand kid pitcher couldn't repeat the trick he played on us in their town last Saturday, but he did it, and everybody's chewing the rag. If he can keep that up, they'll grab the pennant away from us. They're getting the jump on us at the beginning of the season. It's plain we haven't a pitcher to hold his own with that man Locke. Hoover blew up to-day. Locke got his goat, and he won't be any more use against that team. They'll keep Locke just to run against us."

"Has Bancroft ever had a losin' team with me managin'?"

"No, but—"

"She won't this year, either. Leave it to me. Don't go off your nut so soon."

"What do you propose to do?" asked Butler.

"I ain't had much time to figger on it yet, but you can bet your life that I'll do somethin'."

"I lost a hundred on the game to-day," said Dyke mournfully.

"Where did they get hold of Locke?" questioned the lawyer.

"I don't know," confessed Riley. "Cope dug him up, and he ain't tellin' where. Hutchinson don't know no more about the youngster than we do."

"Perhaps he lies," put in Jorkins. "Perhaps he does know."

"He wouldn't take the trouble to lie about it if he knew, and he told me straight that he didn't know."

"Think his conscience would keep him from lying?" asked Fancy.

"Conscience! If Bob Hutchinson has one, nobody ever accused him of it. But if Locke was his find he'd be taking the credit, you bet.

"Don't nobody think for a minute that I'm goin' to sit round and twiddle my thumbs while Kingsbridge is winnin' games off us. I ain't built that way. We'll down 'em somehow or other, mark that."

"We ought to have a pitcher as good as Locke, at any cost," was the opinion of Jorkins.

"At any cost," agreed Butler. "Why don't we have him?"

"Pitchers of that caliber ain't to be picked off ev'ry bush this late in the season," said Riley. "There's other ways of downin' Kingsbridge."

CHAPTER XX

MEN OF CONSCIENCE!

THERE was a moment's silence. Then Dyke spoke up. "We'll be up ag'inst it hard with our left-hand hitters if they keep on holdin' Locke in reserve for us," he said. "Lisotte, McGovern, Bernsteine, Mace—he's got their number, ev'ry one of 'em. It was pitiful to see them tryin' to hit him to-day."

"Never suffered more at a game in all my life," sighed Jorkins. "Every time a man fanned and those Kingsbridgers howled, I had an attack of heart disease. Then think of them loading up with brooms, and bells, and tin horns, and parading through the main street! It was insulting."

"Insulting!" gurgled Butler. "Wonder they weren't pelted with rotten eggs."

"It would have been unfortunate if they'd caught anybody shyin' rotten eggs at them," said Riley. "They were primed for a ruction, and there'd have been merry blazes to pay. Now, gents, just you calm down, and wait for me to straighten things out. Losin' this game to-day,

hit me just as hard as anybody, for I had an idea we'd bag it, dead sure."

"And your confidence, which you expressed unreserved last night, cost me good money," murmured Fancy.

"You've won enough in the past to stand one or two losings."

"I wish you could give us an idea what you propose to do," urged Jorkins.

"I don't mind sayin', confidential, that I mean to do some chinnin' with Bob Hutchinson."

"How is that going to help us?" questioned Butler, in doubt.

Riley winked shrewdly. "Hutch ain't handlin' a team in this bush league from choice, or for his health, and I know enough about him to hang him. He's in a position to muddle things for the Kinks, and, if I have to, I can make him do it. I'll get busy with Hutch to-night. Leave it to me, gents."

"I'd rather beat them on the square," said Kilgore.

"I never knew a lawyer to worry much about the way he won; they'll gener'llly grab at anything that'll land 'em on top. Of course, we'd all rather trim the Kinks on the level; but we can't let them trim us, no matter what we have to do."

"If we did let 'em," said Dyke, "some of the

crazy ones would feel like handin' us some tar and feathers. I reckon we'll have to leave Mike to fix things; he's on the job."

"Thanks," growled Riley sarcastically. "The way you come at me on the street, I didn't know but you was goin' to demand my resignation from the management."

"Oh, we couldn't get another manager like you."

"Thanks ag'in."

"That's right," nodded the lawyer, "we couldn't. We depend on you entirely."

"But, of course," put in Jorkins hastily, "if you enter into any sort of a deal with Hutchinson, we don't care to know about it. You're engaged to manage the team, and see that it wins; but no member of the association is going to advise you to go out for victory in anything but a legitimate, honest manner. I trust you'll see fit not to come to me with information concerning a deal with this dishonest rascal, Hutchinson."

"And don't tell *me* anything about it," cautioned Butler. "I have a conscience, and I'd feel it my duty to protest."

Riley produced a fresh cigar, twisted off the end with his teeth, and lighted a match. Puffing at the cigar, with the match flaring at the end of

it, he made no effort to mask the faint, sneering smile upon his face.

“You’re all men with consciences, I know that,” he said. “I wouldn’t for the world do a thing to make any of ye lose sleep at night. Go home and rest easy. That’s all I have to say.” He rose to his feet.

“I’m very glad to hear you speak that way,” said Jorkins. “It lifts something of a load from my shoulders.”

“Mine, too,” said Butler. “I was worried, but I feel better now.”

CHAPTER XXI

A SECRET MEETING

AT nine o'clock that night, Bob Hutchinson, smoking, stood on the steps of the Central Hotel, in Kingsbridge, and waited. Presently two men, one stout and heavy, the other slender and quickstepping, came round the nearest corner, and hurried toward the steps. "Well, here he is!" muttered Hutchinson, recognizing the heavy man as Riley.

"Hist!" breathed the Bancroft manager, as he puffed up the steps. "'Fraid you wouldn't be here. Let's not hang round. Take us up to y'ur room."

"Come on," said Hutchinson, leading the way.

It was not necessary to pass through the hotel office and writing room, where there were a number of loungers, and some drummers. They mounted the stairs, and reached Hutchinson's room without encountering any one.

"Shut the door," said Riley the moment he was inside. "That was lucky. Nobody seen us come here."

"Rather lucky," agreed the Kingsbridge manager, turning the key in the lock. "I'd just as lief not have it known that you're here. I didn't want you to come, but you insisted. How'd you get here?"

"Gas wagon."

"Oh, yes. Where is it?"

"Left it on the outskirts, so's not to attract attention. Give the chauffeur orders to drive off an' come back in an hour."

"I tried to shut you off from coming when you telephoned, but—"

"I was all ready to start. I'd made up my mind to see ye to-night, anyhow. Shake hands with Mr. Dyke, Mr. Hutchinson."

"Very glad to know you, sport," said Fancy; but he dropped Bob Hutchinson's cold hand almost as soon as he touched it. "I think Mike told you over the phone that I was all right."

The Kingsbridge manager shrugged his shoulders. "I don't quite get wise to his reason for saying that. I presume this is nothing but a social call?"

"Social blazes!" growled Riley. "Think I'd ride thirty miles at night just to make a social call, Bob? You know better."

"If you came for any other purpose," said

Hutchinson, "you should not have brought company. That's straight over the pan, Riley."

"Aw, I tell ye Fancy is trusty; needn't be afraid of him."

"I've had some experience," reminded Hutchinson. "You know what I mean. Are you trying to put me in bad in this town?"

"Not a bit of it."

"Of course, I know the result of the game today raised particular thunder in Bancroft. It must have made them gnash their teeth."

"Gnash 'em—you bet!" said Dyke. "There was an awful holler went up."

"Got anything to drink, Hutch?" asked Riley. "It's a bit chilly ridin' to-night."

"You know I do not drink."

"Well, you can order up a round for Dyke an' me."

"I can, but I won't. The boy would see you here, and in twenty minutes the whole town would know it. Sit down, and make yourselves as comfortable as you can without drinks. Here are cigars."

Riley accepted one of the weeds, but Dyke chose to smoke a cigarette. Although they sat down, they plainly were not at ease; there was an atmosphere of suppressed tension in the room.

"Let's git right down to cases," said Riley abruptly. "You know, a place like Bancroft can't afford to let a raw, mushroom burg of this sort beat it out at baseball, or anything else. We're willin' the games should run close, so's to keep the int'rest up, but we've got to feel all the time that we've got somethin' up our sleeves that'll land us sure at the head of the column when the season finishes."

"Go ahead," nodded Hutchinson, as the speaker paused. "Don't mind me."

"I know you well enough, Hutch," pursued the Bancroft manager significantly, "to be dead sure you ain't goin' out and tattle anything I say to you in confidence. Well, our strongest hitters are left-handers, and that southpaw o' yours bothers 'em. Kingsbridge 'u'd like to win the pennant; but, next to winnin' herself, she'd be satisfied to keep us from coppin' it. Havin' found a pitcher that can hold us down, she'll keep him for that express purpose, no matter how the games with the other teams go. I own up that that pitcher looks like a nasty stumblin' block, and we'd like to git him outer our way."

"We've got to do it!" put in Fancy.

Still cautious about his words before Dyke, Hutchinson made no comment.

"Now," continued Riley, "knowin' you as I do, Hutch, I decided to talk it over with ye. Outside of that guy Locke, you've got a couple of dead ones for twirlers. Deeever's arm is on the blink, and Skillings is a has-been. Playin' five games a week, as you do, with only one lay-off besides Sunday, you need three reg'lar dependable pitchers to do the work."

"What are you driving at?"

"Just this: To win from Fryeburg and Lakeport, you've got to use better slabmen than Deeever or Skillings. Locke is the only one you've got, and so you'll have to work him in them games. See?"

Hutchinson fancied he saw, but he remained silent.

"Of course," said Riley, "you'll make a bluff of workin' the others, but the minute things look a bit hazy you'll yank 'em out and run Locke in to save the day. Get me?"

"And no man," murmured Dyke, "can do that much pitchin' and keep his flinger in condition to trim Bancroft."

"I see," said Hutchinson frostily, "that you *do* want to put me in bad here. If I overworked Locke that way I'd have the whole town howling like mad dogs. Already I've had instructions

from old Cope to save the youngster for Bancroft."

"But you're manager, ain't ye?" rasped Riley. "Are you goin' to run the team or let an old Reuben like him do it? What did they hire ye for?"

"An inquiry I have put to Cope already."

"Y'u're s'posed to know your business. When a game's goin' to the bad, whether you're playin' with Bancroft or any other team, it's up to you to save it, if ye can, by changin' pitchers. As I said, Locke's the only man you can depend on to win games, so you'll have to use him."

"If I should tell them so," said Hutchinson, "I'd mighty soon get orders to go out after other pitchers."

"Where are ye goin' to get them—now? It's too late; they've all been gobbled up—all the good ones. And even if you should happen to know of one that was all right, you wouldn't *have* to sign him. You could try plenty of 'em no better'n Deever and Skillings, able all the time to explain, if the town kicked, that good pitchers couldn't be had. What d'ye say?"

"I'm not saying a word," replied Hutchinson, with another glance in Dyke's direction.

In a way, although it was far from satisfactory,

Riley accepted this as a tacit agreement to his proposal.

"I'd like to know," he growled, after drawing hard at his cigar, "where old man Cope ever found that fellow, anyhow."

"You're not the only person who is curious about it," said the Kingsbridge manager. "One chap seems to think he knows. A young fellow by the name of King came to me about Locke. He's got an idea in his nut that the boy is a Princeton pitcher by the name of Hazelton."

Riley started as if shot, almost dropping his cigar.

"What's that?" he cried. "Hazelton, of Princeton? Great smoke! It can't be possible!"

"Why not? I should say the youngster is a college man."

The manager of the Bancroft Bullies gave his thigh a resounding slap.

"Great smoke!" he exclaimed again. "If that's right, that old rat Cope beat me to it. Why, I made a proposal to Paul Hazelton myself."

"You did?"

"Sure. Biff Durgin, scout for the Phillies, told me about that kid last December; said he was a sure-enough comer. I wrote Hazelton a letter."

"Then," said Dyke quickly, "accordin' to the

rules of the league, you had the call on this Hazelton, in a way. If Locke is the same guy, you've got somethin' on Cope, and you can make some disturbance about it."

Riley lifted himself to his feet, pulling out his watch and looking at it.

"Twenty-five minutes after," he said. "What time do the stores close here? I might be able to catch the old fox in his den."

"Go for him," urged Fancy Dyke. "That's the stuff! If there's a chance to do it, it's up to you to protest Locke. If you can't take him away from the Kinks, mebbe you can stop him from pitchin' in the league, and that would do the business. Shall I come along?"

"You may as well. If this thing really comes to a meetin' to decide on a protest, I may need a witness to the conversation that'll pass between Cope and me to-night."

Hutchinson was on his feet. "Gentlemen," he said, "I presume it's fully understood that my name is not to be mentioned in the matter. You'll say nothing of your visit to me?"

"Aw, sure not," promised Riley. "We're not lookin' to get you fired; we would rather see you stay right here as manager of the Kinks. Don't worry, Hutch; it's all right. Let's hike, Fancy."

CHAPTER XXII

RILEY SHOOTS HIS BOLT

HENRY COPE had a habit of closing his store at night himself. On this particular night his clerks had left, and he was lingering in his cramped little office to straighten out his books. A single swinging oil lamp burned dimly in the front of the store. The old man betrayed annoyance as he heard the front door open, and the sound of heavy footsteps came to his ears.

“Now, who wants anything at this hour?” he muttered. “Hello! Who is it? What d’ye want?” He pushed the spectacles up on to his forehead and leaned back from the desk to peer out through the rather dingy office window, seeing two dark figures approaching.

“Evenin’, Mr. Cope,” saluted Riley, his ample form filling the narrow doorway. “Don’t git up. I’ve just dropped in to have a few words with ye.”

“Good evenin’, Mr. Riley. This is a surprise. What’re you doin’ in Kingsbridge at this hour? Howdy do, Dyke?”

"Come up special to see you on 'portant business," returned the Bancroft manager, without loss of time. "It's about your pitcher, Locke. Would you mind lettin' me see the date on your contrac' with him?"

"Hey?" exploded Cope, decidedly startled. "Let you see the contrac'? You've got a nerve! If I had a reg'lar written contrac' with him, I wouldn't show it t' *you*. What're you drivin' at?"

"Then you haven't a contrac'?"

"I didn't say so; I said a written contrac'. Of course, there's an agreement between Locke and me. 'Tain't necessary for it to be in writin'."

"When did you enter into this contrac'?"

"That's *my* business. Hang it, man! d'you think I'm goin' to tell you my business? You've got another guess comin'."

Henry Cope was decidedly warm and wrathful.

"Keep y'ur shirt on," advised Riley. "Mebbe you'll state when you fust entered into negotiations with Locke?"

"Mebbe I will—and, then again, mebbe I won't. What's that to you? You ain't got nothin' to do with it."

"Don't be so cocksure about that. You oughter know the rules and regerlations of the league.

The manager or backers of any team can't negotiate or dicker with a player who is negotiatin' with any other team in the league."

"What of it?"

"What of it!" croaked Mike Riley, twisting his thumb into the glittering infant logging chain that spanned his waistcoat. "Just this: I may have a claim on Tom Locke myself, on the ground of first negotiation with him."

Cope rose to his feet. He was perspiring freely, and the expression on his usually mild face was one of deepest indignation.

"Looker here, you man," he cried. "Just because you're manager of a bullyin' baseball team you can't come here and bully me. I've got a pitcher that can make monkeys of your bunch o' players, and you realize it, so you want to gouge me outer him somehow. But it won't work, Riley—it won't work. You never heard o' Tom Locke in your life till you heard of him pitchin' for Kingsbridge. You never saw him till you saw him right here in this town. Now you come round and make a bluff that you've got a previous claim on him. That's your style, but it don't go in this case."

"I acknowledge," admitted Riley coolly, "that I never heard of Tom Locke before that time."

“Ha! I knowed it!”

“But,” said the Bancroft manager, having removed the cigar from his mouth, “I have heard of Paul Hazelton, of Princeton, and I hold fust claim on him, ’cordin’ to the rules of the Northern League!”

Riley had shot his bolt, and, judging by appearances, it had struck home. Henry Cope stood dumfounded, his mouth open, some of the color aroused by his wrath slowly leaving his face. His expression was as good as a confession that the Bancroft manager had made no mistake in naming the man.

Fancy Dyke chuckled with satisfaction. The corners of Riley’s thick lips were pulled down; his eyes bored Cope mercilessly. After a time, the Kingsbridge man caught his breath, fumbled for his handkerchief, and mopped away the cold perspiration on his face, his hand not quite steady.

“How—how’d you ever git that idea?” he asked weakly. “What ever give ye the notion that his name was Hazelton?”

Riley was thoroughly satisfied; he knew beyond a doubt that he had hit the nail on the head. Returning the cigar to his mouth, he said grimly:

“Did you have a notion you could wool me, old boy? It’s my business to know ’bout ball play-

ers, and when I don't know it's my business t' find out. I was negotiatin' with this man Hazelton last December. I s'pose he used my offer to pry a bigger one outer you, which is just what the league rule coverin' the point was made to prevent. That rule was adopted so players couldn't work one manager agin' another; likewise, so one manager couldn't bother another by monkeyin' with players he was arter. We'll fix this up; Kingsbridge can transfer Hazelton to Bancroft."

"Hold on! Hold on!" sputtered Cope desperately. "I ain't said you was right; I ain't acknowledged Tom Locke's name is Hazelton."

"You don't have to," returned Riley; "*I know* it. You can send him down to us in the mornin'. Just to save argument, I'll pay him the same sal'ry you're payin', though I reckon it's more'n I offered him."

He made a move to depart.

"Hold on!" cried Cope again. "You'll never git him. We won't give him up."

"Oh, won't ye? Then you oughter know what'll happen. He won't be 'lowed to pitch ag'in, and the games he's pitched a'ready will be thrown outer the percentage count. You better think it over calm and reasonable, Cope. Good night."

CHAPTER XXIII

LEFTY'S FICKLE MEMORY

THEY left him there, shaking with rage. He heard them laugh outside the door when it had closed behind them, and he lifted and shook both his fists in their direction.

“Ye shan’t have him!” he snarled. “I’ll never give the boy up! It’s one o’ Bancroft’s mean tricks. They’ll do anything to get ahead of Kingsbridge. It’s a measly shame they’ve tumbled to who the youngster is. I’d give some-thin’ to find out how that happened.”

He stopped suddenly, a hand lifted, his head thrown back, his mouth open.

“I know!” he breathed. “That must be th’ way it was. Bent King come to me and asked a heap of questions ’bout Lefty—where was he from, how did I find him, was he a college man?—and all that. I didn’t tell him nothin’, but all the time I had an oneasy feelin’ that he knowed more’n was a good thing f’r him to know. If Bent’s been and blowed he oughter be shot!”

Henry Cope did not sleep well that night, and

he rose in the morning at an unusually early hour, even for him. When he appeared at the Central Hotel and inquired for Locke, he was told that Tom was not yet up, and did not often get to breakfast before eight o'clock.

"I've got t' see him right away," said Cope. "I'll go up to his room. It'll be all right."

"I wonder what's the matter with him?" said the clerk to a bell hop, when Cope had hurried away up the stairs. "He looks all broke up this morning."

"Mebbe the groc'ry business and baseball is too much for him," grinned the boy. "He's fussin' over the team all the time. What did they hire a manager for? Why don't he let Hutchinson run the ball team?"

Cope knocked twice at the door of a room. After the second knock, a sleepy voice asked who was there.

"It's me," answered the man outside. "It's Mr. Cope. Somethin' important. Got to see ye right away."

In a few moments the door was opened, and Locke stood there, in pajamas, yawning.

"It must be important to bring you around this hour, Mr. Cope," he said, with a sleepy laugh. "Come in."

When the door was closed, the grocer faced the young pitcher. "Hazelton," he said, "why didn't y'u tell me you had been negotiatin' with Riley?"

Much of Locke's sleepy appearance vanished.

"What's that?" he asked sharply. "Negotiating with Riley? What are you talking about? I haven't been negotiating with him. What do you take me for, Mr. Cope? Do you think I would do a thing like that after entering into an agreement with you?"

"I don't mean that you've been dickerin' with him since then, but before. You never told me that Riley had made any proposition to ye to pitch f'r Bancroft this season."

"Who says he did?"

"He says so. He came here last night and stated that he had fust claim on ye, 'cordin' to the rules of the league, which bars any manager from tryin' to git a man another manager is negotiatin' with."

Tom Locke was very wide awake now.

"How could he make any such claim. It is preposterous, Mr. Cope, as you ought to know. I hope you haven't let that man bluff you. Why, he doesn't know who I am!"

"Oh, but he does—that's the thing of it. He

came to my store, 'long with Fancy Dyke, and told me just who you was—called you by your right name."

The younger man sat down suddenly on the edge of the bed, a startled expression on his face. For some moments he stared at the caller, as if at a loss for words.

"I don't understand how he got wise," he finally said slowly. "Called me by my right name, did he?"

"Yep; said he knowed you was Paul Hazelton, of Princeton, and that he was negotiatin' with ye last December. Now, what I want to know is if there's any truth in that statement. If there is, we're in a hole. Did you git a letter from him? Did you write him an answer?"

To the increasing surprise and alarm of Cope, the pitcher seemed to hesitate about replying.

"Did ye? Did ye?" cried the older man impatiently. "Why don't ye answer? You know whether you got such a letter or not, don't ye? You know if ye answered it? What's the matter? Answer! If you done that, we're in a hole. They've got it on us. And to think of that, just when we was holdin' the best hand over them! Speak up, boy!"

"I am trying to think," said Locke.

“Tryin’ to think! Look here, you told me you’d never done anything like this before—you’d never played baseball f’r money. Now anybody’d s’pose you’d had so many offers you couldn’t remember ’bout ’em. You was mighty partic’lar to have it ’ranged so nobody’d be likely to find out who you was.”

Lefty smiled a bit ruefully.

“Apparently all that precaution was wasted,” he said. “I give you my word, Mr. Cope, that I have no recollection of ever receiving a letter from Mike Riley, and I am doubly certain that he holds no communication from me. You know I did not send you a written answer to your proposition. A college pitcher who wrote such letters, and signed them with his own name, would prove himself a fool. He’d never know when the letter might bob up to confound him. It would be evidence enough to get him dropped from his college team in double-quick time. No, I am positive I never wrote to Riley.”

Cope breathed somewhat easier, although he was still very much disturbed.

“Then, even if he writ to you, there wasn’t no negotiations, for it takes two parties, at least, to enter inter negotiations. He’ll find he can’t bluff me on that tack.”

"Give me time—all I ask is a few days—and I can answer positively whether or not he ever wrote to me."

"That don't make no diff'runce, if you didn't answer it. He'll find he's barkin' up the wrong tree when he tries to bluff me outer a pitcher that fashion."

"I presume there will be more or less publicity over this contention, and that'll be unfortunate—for me."

"Yes, I'm worried over that. Riley'll be sure to let ev'rybody know that you're Hazelton, of Princeton, though mebbe it won't git outside the Northern League to bother ye when you go back to college."

"Maybe not, but the chances are that it will, if Riley makes much of a roar over it."

"But you won't quit?" cried Cope, in sudden panic. "If he tries to frighten ye out by threatenin' to blow the matter broadcast, you won't let him drive ye that way? Great Scott! That would fix us! It would be almost as bad as havin' to give ye up to them."

"I am not much of a quitter," answered the other man, with a smile. "It will be a mighty bad thing to have the facts made public; but, once I've set my hand to anything, I seldom turn

back. I don't think you need to worry about losing me, Mr. Cope."

The storekeeper rushed forward and seized the young pitcher's hand.

"Good f'r you!" he spluttered. "That's the stuff! We'll hold Bancroft's nose right to the grindstone; we'll put the wood to 'em this year. But I'm mighty sorry, on your 'count, boy; it'll be tough if you're really chucked off your college team."

"Well, we won't worry about that," laughed Locke, rising and returning the hearty handshake. "We'll have to take things as they come. It'll give me additional satisfaction now to down Bancroft. I have a personal feeling about it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MATTER OF VERACITY

NEAR eleven o'clock that forenoon, Henry Cope saw Benton King passing his store. Immediately he hurried out, calling to the young man.

"Hey, Bent!" he cried. "Want to see ye a minute. Come back here, will ye?"

King came back.

"What's the matter, Mr. Cope? You seem somewhat disturbed."

"Come inter my office, won't ye? I want to ask you a few questions. 'Twon't take long."

King glanced at his watch. He was wearing a woolen shirt and his ordinary mill clothes, but even in such common toggery he was a rather handsome young fellow.

"All right," he said; "I've got ten minutes to spare."

He was speculating a bit as he followed the storekeeper into the cramped private office.

"Set down," invited Cope.

"I prefer to stand, if you don't mind."

"All right. I'll come right to the p'int. I s'posed you was ruther interested in our baseball team, and I didn't cal'late you'd do anything to hurt it."

"You were quite right," said Bent.

"Well, if that's the case, why have you been tellin' that Tom Locke is a college pitcher from Princeton? Why did you go and put such a notion into the noddles of the Bancrofters? What made you give Mike Riley such an idea?"

The young man frowned.

"Who says anything of the sort? I have never mentioned this fellow you call Locke to Riley, or any other Bancroft man. I wish you would explain how you got the impression that I had."

Cope told of Riley's visit and his threat, Bent listening with great interest, which the expression of his face indicated.

"You're the only person 'round here," the storekeeper concluded, "who has said anything about Tom Locke bein' anybody 'cept what he calls himself. You come to me and tried to pump me 'bout him. You said you'd got the notion that Locke was Hazelton, of Princeton. Now, somebody put Riley onter that, and if it wasn't you, who was it?"

"I'm unable to answer your question, Cope;

but I assure you that it was not I. But it is quite evident that I was not wrong in believing I knew Mr. Locke; he is Hazelton, of Princeton—isn't he?"

"Now, that don't have nothin' to do with it. I told ye before when you asked me that you'd have to go to somebody else to find out."

"Which was practically a confession that I had scored a bull's-eye. I was right."

Cope puckered his face and rapped impatiently on his desk with his knuckles.

"Well, now, s'pose you *was* right, do you want to make a heap of trouble for the team by publishin' it and gittin' us mixed up with Bancroft in a fuss over him? Was that your objec'? Is that the way you help your own town team to down them Bullies?"

"Hardly. I had quite a different object, believe me. What it was does not concern you at all, Cope; it's my own affair. However, if the fellow has been using Bancroft as a cat's-paw to help him squeeze Kingsbridge for a fancy salary, it will serve him right if he gets it in the neck, and finds himself barred from both teams. That's the way I look at it."

Cope sprang to his feet excitedly, almost choking in the effort to utter the words which rushed

to his lips. He was mightily disturbed, and, as usual when overwrought, he perspired freely.

"But he says he never done nothin' of the sort, and he wouldn't lie."

"Wouldn't he?" said Bent, with a faint sneer. "Why not?"

"Because he's an honest young feller—honest and square as a brick."

"How do you know that? Let me tell you, Cope, that a college man who will play summer ball for money, under a fictitious name, is not honest; and such a fellow wouldn't choke a little bit over a lie."

"Y'u're wrong 'bout this chap—dead wrong; he's on the level."

"He may be," admitted King, preparing to depart; "but I have my doubts. I wouldn't trust him out of sight. Why, such a man might double cross you any time. He can be bought and sold. It may be a very good thing for the team to dispense with his services."

Having said this, he left the office and the store, heedless of some parting words from Cope, who was far more agitated than he had been before the interview.

There was triumph in Benton King's heart, for the last shadow of uncertainty regarding the

identity of Kingsbridge's star pitcher had vanished. He had felt before that he was on the right track, but now he was positive about it; Henry Cope's refusal to answer his point-blank question had been admission enough.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TEST AND THE DENIAL

AT the post office, as he had hoped, King met Janet. Since Sunday, he had scarcely caught a glimpse of her, but he knew she sometimes came for the mail near that hour, and the knowledge brought him there from the mill. As she was leaving, he joined her, making an excuse to walk in the same direction.

They chatted about various trivial things, Janet seeming quite light-hearted. He, however, was troubled; he wished that she would speak of baseball, which would make it easier for him to introduce the matter that was on his mind. Coming in sight of the parsonage at last, he decided to delay no longer.

"I understand," he said abruptly, "that Kingsbridge's great pitcher, Locke, is in trouble."

"In trouble?" she exclaimed, surprised. "How?" The undisguised depth of her interest, and her all too apparent alarm, gave him a stab of anger.

"Oh," he answered, with pretended careless-

ness, "it has just leaked out that he played a rather slick two-handed game with Bancroft and Kingsbridge, and Mike Riley is making a holler about it. He professes to hold first claim on the man. If so, this town will lose the mighty south-paw."

Her alarm became almost panicky.

"I don't understand, and I don't believe a word of it. It's only another of Riley's tricks. How can he have any claim on Lefty?"

He explained.

"Oh," said Janet, "is Lefty really and truly a college man? I felt sure he could not be just an ordinary professional player. He seems far too refined and well bred."

"He's a college man, all right. He looked familiar to me at first sight, but I was not sure I had seen him before. His name is Hazelton, and he did some pitching for Princeton this year, but I don't think he was a regular on that team until the end of last season. I suppose he thought that, coming away up here in the bush, he could get by under a fake name without being found out. They're wise to him, however, and now he's in bad. It should end his career as a college pitcher."

"That would be a shame!"

King shrugged his shoulders.

"Why so? A college player who goes into the game professionally deserves no sympathy if exposed. He's crooked, and he has no right ever again to appear on his college nine."

"I don't believe Lefty would do anything crooked," she declared stoutly. "He has an honest face. You're prejudiced against him, Bent."

"It isn't prejudice," was his defense. "The facts speak for themselves. If he is Hazelton, of Princeton, playing here under a false name, he's dishonest."

"Then I don't believe he is Hazelton, at all."

They had stopped at the cottage steps.

"I have wired for proof," he said grimly. "I did so Monday, and I'll know positively before long. Already, however, I am quite satisfied; for if the man isn't Hazelton why should Riley make such a claim? And why doesn't Henry Cope deny it?"

"I didn't think it of you!" she cried, her face flushed and her eyes scornful. "I didn't think you would do such a thing, Benton King."

"I wished to satisfy myself regarding the man's honesty," he explained, still standing on the defensive. "I had no intention of making public

such knowledge as I might obtain about him. I'll own up that I did mean to tell you, for I wished you to know just what sort of a person he is. You're altogether too interested in him, Janet, and I care too much for you to see you fooled by a fellow of his character."

She tossed her head.

"I think your motive was purely personal."

"Janet!" he exclaimed reproachfully.

"I can't help it! I can't help thinking so! I won't believe Tom Locke is deceptive, dishonest, crooked; and it seems that is what he must be if he, a college man, is playing here for money under a false name."

"Just so. And, as he happens to be coming down the street this minute, we'll put him to the test. Will you let me ask him a few questions before you?"

She had turned swiftly to look; her face lost some color as she saw Locke, accompanied by two other players, all in uniforms, coming that way. They had been at the field for morning practice, and, after making a cut across lots, were following that street back into town.

As Janet hesitated, doubtful, and ready to hurry into the house, King again sought permission to interrogate the man while she listened.

"If you will leave it to me," he promised, "I'll not embarrass you by giving him reason to believe we have had a discussion about him."

"Very well," said the girl faintly, standing her ground.

Locke and his companions lifted their caps as they drew near, and Bent, unsmiling, lifted his hat. In a cold voice, he called:

"O, Locke, I say, would you mind stopping a moment?"

A flicker of surprise passed over Lefty's face. He stopped, and his companions went on.

"How do you do, Mr. Locke?" said Janet, in a voice which she tried hard to keep steady.

"I didn't see you at the game Tuesday, Miss Harting," said the pitcher.

"I wasn't there. I should have enjoyed it, but father is opposed to the game, and objects to my attending."

"You will be missed."

King's teeth clicked, and the frigid expression on his face was blotted by a hot frown. He measured Locke with his eyes, getting for the first time the impression that the man was far better set up than he had supposed, and not quite as slender. Also, he was struck by the conviction that Locke was older than he had fancied; although his face

looked somewhat boyish—particularly so at a distance, upon the baseball field—upon closer inspection it appeared more manly and seemed to possess a certain sort of dignity. Surely there was nothing common or ordinary about the fellow.

“Pardon me, Locke,” said Bent, “but—do you know?—you’ve puzzled me a bit!”

“Really? In what manner?”

“At first sight of you, last Saturday, I felt that I had seen you somewhere before. I’m sure of it now.”

“I don’t recall ever having seen you outside of this town.”

“That’s not strange. I’m not a baseball player, although I am a Harvard man. Yes, there’s no doubt about it, I have seen you.”

“When?” asked Locke, as if the question came from unwilling lips. “Where?”

“At Cambridge,” asserted King, keeping his eyes fixed unwaveringly on the other man’s face, “a year ago this past spring, when Princeton played Harvard. You did not pitch, but you were on the Princeton bench.”

There was a hush, in which Bent, still keeping his eyes fixed on Locke’s face, could hear Janet breathing quickly through her parted lips. His heart leaped, for Lefty was faltering, and it

seemed that the girl must perceive the faint shade of dismay that passed over his face.

"I think you are mistaken," said the pitcher, breaking the silence at last.

King laughed.

"You *think* so! Really? Then perhaps you will deny that you were there?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"I deny it."

"Do you mean to say you were not there?"

"I was not there."

Swiftly lifting his hand, Benton pointed a level, accusing finger like a pistol at Locke's face.

"Perhaps," he cried, "you will make an additional denial. Perhaps you will deny that you are Paul Hazelton, of Princeton?"

Janet leaned forward, her hands clasped, her blue eyes full of suspense. So much depended on the forthcoming answer! If he were to confess that he had been named by King, she felt that henceforth she must hold him in disdain as being all that Benton had asserted he was. But if he should deny it— His lips parted to reply:

"Most certainly I deny it! I am not Paul Hazelton, of Princeton."

The girl uttered a little cry of joyous relief:

"There, there! You see—you see, you were mistaken, Bent. I knew—I knew you must be! I knew it could not be true. I was sure Lefty—he—Mr. Locke wouldn't do a thing like that. I'm so glad!"

But, although surprised by the man's nerve, Benton King was not jostled from the perch of belief on which he had settled. He had thought that the fellow, fairly cornered, would not dare to make a point-blank denial. It seemed, however, that Locke had elected to play the hand out, even with the leading trumps against him. He turned and smiled into the blue eyes of the rejoicing girl.

"And I am glad to know you felt so sure I wouldn't do a thing like that. I trust your confidence in me may never waver."

"For real, pure bluff," thought Bent King, "that's the limit! But it's a losing game. He's fouled himself now for fair."

Getting his breath, he spoke aloud:

"It's strange I should make such a mistake, Mr. Locke—very strange. Of course, I know that many college players go in for summer ball on the quiet. Just to satisfy my own curiosity, I've sent for some information concerning Paul Hazelton, who made a record by pitching and winning two of Princeton's big games recently. Of course, as

you say you are not Hazelton, I might have spared myself the trouble. Still, if the friend to whom I sent can get hold of a picture of Hazelton, it will be amusing to make a comparison between that likeness and yourself, just to see how strong the resemblance may be. I have an idea that Hazelton is almost your perfect double."

"It would be rather odd, wouldn't it, if it should prove so?" smiled Locke coolly. "Still, such things sometimes happen. I think I'll hustle along to the hotel. Good morning, Mr. King. Good morning, Miss Harting. I trust I'll soon have the pleasure of seeing you again at the games."

They stood there and watched his retreating figure until he passed from view round a corner. Janet's face, though showing satisfaction, was a bit haughty and accusing as she spoke to Bent.

"I hope you realize now," she said bitingly, "that you have made a big blunder."

"No," he returned, "it was that man Hazelton who made the blunder in denying his identity."

"Why—why, do you still think—"

"I haven't the slightest doubt in the world—he is Paul Hazelton. I'll prove to your satisfaction, Janet, that he is not only dishonest, but a most contemptible liar, as well."

CHAPTER XXVI

WAS IT A BLUFF?

KINGSBRIDGE was to play at home that day, with Lakeport. It being the middle of the week, the crowd on hand at the hour for the game to begin was not more than one-third as large as the average Saturday attendance.

The enthusiasm aroused by the two clean victories over Bancroft, however, was sufficient to bring out nearly every interested Kingsbridger who could come; and many who knew they should not do so came, temporarily neglecting their business. Soothing a troubled conscience is often the task of the howling fan on the bleachers, and if games were never attended save by those who feel that they have a perfect right to attend, the gate receipts would dwindle frightfully.

Henry Cope arrived as the locals were getting in the last round of practice before the contest started. Hutchinson had his eye out for the storekeeper, to whom he beckoned at once, rising from the bench.

“Well,” said Cope, as he came up, flushed, “how’s things lookin’ to-day?”

“All right, as far as this game is concerned,” replied the manager, in his unenthusiastic way; “but I have something in my pocket that’s got me guessing.”

“Hey? What is it?”

“A letter from Mike Riley, received to-day noon.”

“Oh, is that so?” snapped Cope, instantly deciding that he knew something as to the tenor of that letter. “Well, what’s that bullyraggin’ bluffer got to say? Lemme see it.”

“I’ll show it to you later, when we’re not quite so conspicuous. I can state the gist of its contents accurately, for I’ve read it over several times. Riley asserts that, according to Rule Fourteen of the by-laws of the Northern League, he holds first and undisputable claim to the pitcher who has been working for us under the name of Tom Locke.”

“The dratted snake!” rasped the storekeeper. “He can’t gull me! There ain’t nothin’ to it, Hutchinson, so don’t you let him git ye on a string.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing to it? He demands that we surrender the man to Bancroft at

once, and says he has already notified you of his claim."

"Oh, yes, he's notified me, in a way; and I practically told him where he could go. It's a put-up job to gouge us out of a pitcher that's got the whole o' Bancroft scared pea green. We've got 'em goin', and they're afraid they can't beat us on the level, so, arter their usual style, they put up a job to weaken us by stealin' our pitcher. That's Bancroft out an' out, and Mike Riley's a good tool to work the trick for them; but he can't work it—he can't, I tell ye!"

"Doubtless you know more about the merits of the case than I do," said Hutchinson calmly; "for you signed this man who calls himself Locke. Riley says Locke is a Princeton College pitcher by the name of Hazelton. How about that?"

"Riley thinks he's wise," returned Cope evasively, "but mebbe he don't know as much as he's got a notion he does. Anyhow, whether Locke is Hazelton or not, I'm dead sure Bancroft ain't got no legal claim to him."

"I hope you're right, of course, for Locke seems to be a fairly good pitcher."

"Fairly good—*fairly*! Why, he's a ripper, a bird, a wonder! His match ain't never pitched the horsehide in these parts."

“Perhaps not; we won’t argue about that. From his letter, I should judge that Riley really means to put up a fight for Locke, or Hazelton, whichever you choose to call him. He states that, unless the man is immediately released to him, he will make a formal protest to Anson Graham, president of the league, and he has requested me to call the attention of the directors of our local association to the matter.”

“Nothin’ but wind. He won’t push it, for he ain’t got a leg to stand on.”

“He likewise states that, in case we use Lefty again, the protest will contain a request that all games in which Locke plays on any Northern League team except Bancroft shall not be reckoned in the percentage record of such a team. Now, Mr. Cope, if he does push this thing, and the decision should go against us, it would knock the stuffing out of our standing in the league. We are also warned not to use Locke again until the question is settled. Unless you know beyond the shadow of uncertainty that Bancroft can’t establish her claim, we’d better hurry the matter to a settlement, or keep Locke on the bench.”

Henry Cope was greatly wrought up.

“Keep him on the bench! That’s just what Riley’d like to frighten us inter doin’. If he

could only scare us so we wouldn't dast use Locke for a while he'd have the laugh on us, whether he proved his case or not. He's full o' tricks as an egg's full o' meat."

"Well, until the matter is settled, I think we'd better use Locke as little as possible. I don't believe it would be advisable, under any circumstances, to run him into this game to-day."

"This game! I should say not! We've got other pitchers for games like this. We'll keep Locke special to down Bancroft. If we can't hold our own with the rest of the teams with the pitchers we've got, we'll git more pitchers."

The umpire was ready, and the game was on the verge of starting, so Hutchinson returned to the bench.

Despite his outward boldness, Henry Cope was troubled, for it began to seem that Riley really meant to press his claim, an action that would be foolish unless he could back it up with proof. The grocer sought Tom Locke, and drew him away from the bench.

The young man listened to Cope's words, frowning a little, the blood slowly mounting into his cheeks.

"They seem determined to make as much trouble for me as possible," he said. "I have a feel-

ing that Hutchinson doesn't like me too much, and there is another individual in town who is doing his prettiest to stir things up. Benton King is the chap I mean. He has sent for a photograph of Paul Hazelton."

"Has he? Well, what d'ye think o' that? See here, Bent's ruther smashed on the parson's daughter. You ain't been cuttin' in on his preserves, have ye?"

"I scarcely know the girl," answered Locke; but the flush in his cheeks deepened. "Mr. Cope, consider that I've been in this town only a few days."

"I know that, but some o' you baseball fellers are pretty swift with the gals. They generally git their pick in towns like this, for the gals go smashed on 'em right off. Still, Janet Harting ain't just that kind; she's a fine little lady, and she wouldn't pick up with no stranger in a hurry, whether he played baseball or not."

"I'd scarcely fancy her foolish or forward. She appears to be a very nice girl, indeed."

"They don't grow none better, boy. She's all right, though her father'd put an everlastin' end to baseball, if he could have his way. You're dead sure this man Riley ain't got nothin' on ye?"

"I'm practically sure of it. He's bluffing, Mr.

Cope, and he'll lay down when he finds he can't drive you."

There was something in the way this was said, however, that left a vague uneasiness in the grocer's mind. "Practically sure," he muttered, as he sat on the bleachers, scarcely paying any attention to the run of the game. "Why ain't he dead sure? It's mighty odd that he should be at all onsartin on that p'int."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ITEM IN THE NEWS

THE match did not progress favorably for Kingsbridge. For five innings, Skillings fought hard to hold his own, but the "Lakers," as the Lakeport team was called, seemed to have his measure, and Hutchinson notified Stark to substitute Deever in the sixth, the score standing 7 to 5 in favor of the visitors when the change was made.

Deever took it up with reluctance, for his sore arm would not permit him to throw anything but a "lob ball." That slow teaser, however, bothered the Lakers for a while; but in the eighth they began to time it right, and drove in three more tallies, which clinched the game. Cope heard a man near him complaining.

"Lefty could have saved it if Hutch had put him in," declared the dissatisfied one. "He's the only real pitcher we've got. Skillings belongs in the discards, and Deever hasn't got anything left in his sleeve."

"But we can't pitch Lefty all the time," re-

turned another man. "We'd be fools to work him too much. We're holding him back for the Bullies. He's got that bunch measured, and they're pie for him."

When the game was over and the regretful crowd was passing slowly out through the gates, Cope sought Hutchinson.

"We've got to have another pitcher," he said.

"Is that so?" said the manager. "I saw you talking with Lefty. Is he frightened out? Is he going to quit the league, or will he go to Bancroft?"

"He won't do neither!" rasped Cope. "And he ain't frightened. I say we've got to have another pitcher because it's plain that Lefty's the only real first-class twirler we own."

"Skillings will be all right when he rounds into shape," asserted Hutch. "I didn't sign Deever."

"Well, I did—and he's as good as Skillings. Neither one of them ain't got the goods. Do you know of any good pitcher we can get hold of in a hurry?"

"Such a man will be hard to find late in June."

"But we've got to find him!" came grimly from Cope's lips. "No matter what price we have to pay, we've got to have another top-notch slabman. If you can't find him—"

"I presume," cut in Hutchinson coldly, "that I can find him if he is to be found."

"Then git busy. Make the wires hot! This town is out to win this year, if it goes bankrupt, and we ain't goin' to be held down by tricks, lack of pitchers, or anything else."

"No doubt it will be wise to get a line on another man right away, as we'll be in a hole if Bancroft can back up her claim to Lefty. How did he take it when you told him what was going on?"

"Never turned a hair. He ain't worried."

"Isn't he? Well, I'd be if I were in his place—that is, if I wanted to pitch college baseball any more. This rumpus over him is bound to be his finish in that line. It isn't my funeral, but I think he's a fool not to hush it up if he can. It's sure to get into the newspapers, and then the Princeton nine will bid good-by to Lefty Hazelton. They'll have no more use for him."

Shortly after breakfast, Saturday, Bob Hutchinson rapped on the door of Tom Locke's room, and was invited to come in. He entered, bearing a newspaper in his hand, and found Locke writing at a small desk furnished by the hotel proprietor on particular request.

"Good morning," said Tom, evincing a shade

of surprise at the call. "Have a chair." He put aside the pen, and turned his own chair from the desk.

"This unfortunate contention over you," Hutchinson said, "seems to be creating considerable disturbance. To say the least, it's annoying."

"I quite agree on that point," nodded the pitcher, "and it is far more annoying to me than it can possibly be to any one else."

"I should think it might be, although I wish to state that it has jarred me some. I'd like to know whether we have a good claim to you or not. Have you seen the *Bancroft News* this morning?"

"No."

"Here it is. You'll find something of interest concerning you here in the sporting department."

He handed over the newspaper, indicating the article mentioned, and sat down. Not once did he take his cold eyes off Locke's face as the latter read the piece pointed out.

The *News* has learned that a warm controversy is in progress over a certain remarkable young left-handed pitcher who has created a decided sensation by his phenomenal slabwork for one of Bancroft's strong rivals in the Northern League. The man in question is said to be a college pitcher who is playing under an assumed name, this discovery being made by our astute manager, Mr. Riley, who is certainly on the job every minute. To put one over on Michael Riley it is neces-

sary to catch him napping, and the sleepless-eyed sleuth of yellow fiction is a Rip Van Winkle compared with Mike.

In ferreting out the identity of this young southpaw wizard, our manager found that the dangerous twirler who has twice humbled the hard-hitting "Bans"—we prefer this abbreviated familiar name for the team, although it is commonly known by another—is a prominent college star with whom Riley was negotiating as long ago as last December, and, as there is a league rule forbidding any team in the organization to dicker with a player who has made overtures to, or entered into correspondence with, another team, Mike lost no time in asserting his claim to this man. The team that has the coveted man, however, is naturally quite reluctant to give him up, and it seems now that the case must be settled by a meeting of the league directors, which will probably be called some time next week.

Doubtless the publicity which this contention must produce will be very annoying to the young pitcher, and it may have a disastrous effect upon his standing as a college athlete; for the college man who is known to compete for money in baseball or any other sport becomes rated as a professional and is barred from college games. Nevertheless, more sympathy would be felt for the man had he not played the management of one Northern League team against another to his own advantage in the matter of salary. Should exposure and disbarment from amateur sports follow, there are some who must feel that he has only himself to blame.

Locke made no effort to hide his annoyance. "I doubted if Riley would carry it this far," he said warmly.

"Why not?" questioned Hutchinson unemotionally. "You couldn't expect him to hold back on account of what might happen to you at college. Any bush-league manager will give a college

player every protection possible under ordinary circumstances, but there is nothing ordinary about this case, and you've certainly put yourself in bad by the course you have pursued. If I had a claim on a coveted player, similar to that which Riley professes to hold on you, I'd surely push it to the limit."

"I don't know whether or not I have made the statement to you personally," said Lefty grimly, "but I will tell you now that Mike Riley has no claim whatever upon me."

"How about the letter he says you wrote him last December, in response to his offer?"

"If such a letter was written him, it was a declination of the offer, and therefore put an end to negotiations. A man can't be bound to a manager by any rule simply because he writes refusing the offer."

"Not unless that refusal is, on its face, a suggestion or a proposition that a higher offer might be considered. In the latter case, negotiations would still be pending. Do you assert that your letter to Riley gave him to understand distinctly that you would not take any offer from him into consideration, Hazelton?"

"I have not said that I ever wrote Riley a letter, or ever received one from him; and while I am

in Kingsbridge I prefer to be called Locke, not Hazelton."

"Oh," said Hutchinson, "of course we'll humor you in that whim, although you must know that your real identity cannot be kept secret after this. I don't suppose you'll deny that Hazelton is your proper name?"

"I have said that I prefer to be called Locke."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GAGE FLUNG DOWN

HUTCHINSON laughed in a mirthless manner, no sound escaping his thin lips. The young man had refused a direct answer, and nimbly made his escape from the corner in which Hutch had tried to pin him, but it seemed that he might as well have owned up without squirming.

“It’s a peculiar affair,” said the manager, after a few moments, during which Lefty sat frowning at the newspaper he still held in his hand. “Riley proposes to protest against the counting of any games we may win with you pitching. It seems that old man Cope is getting cold feet, for he has instructed me to fish up another pitcher or two without delay, and I’ve got some lines out already.”

The pitcher lifted his eyes and gazed steadily at Hutchinson, as if looking straight and deep into the hidden chambers of the man’s mind, there to read his secret thoughts and purposes. In spite of himself, Hutch felt his icy self-control

melting; in spite of himself, he betrayed resentment; and there was—amazingly—a touch of warmth in the question he fired at Tom Locke:

“Well, what’s the matter? I don’t suppose you have an idea that we’re going to drift along and do nothing, in the face of the possibility of losing you and having the games you’ve pitched thrown out?”

“I was wondering,” said Tom quietly, “just how deeply you were interested in the baseball welfare of Kingsbridge. Somehow, I can’t help fancying that it wouldn’t disturb you much if I got it in the neck, and had to quit or go to Bancroft.”

Hutchinson sneered.

“Haven’t you got a touch of the swelled nut? Do you think you’re the only pitcher in the business? Winning those two games from Bancroft must have puffed you up aplenty.”

“I have won games before I ever came here, or I couldn’t have won those games,” was the retort. “I know you are only a hired manager; but, as long as you are taking Kingsbridge money for your services, it’s up to you to give Kingsbridge your very best interest and effort.”

The manager rose, the blaze that had flared strangely a moment before having sunken to cold

ashes of resentment. He had not liked this young fellow from the first; now that Locke had dared speak out in such a fearless manner, indicating the ease with which he had plumbed the shallow depth of Hutchinson's loyalty, the man's hatred became intense. Nevertheless, he sought to resume his habitual mask of cold indifference.

"I've seen plenty of young cubs like you," he said in his usual level, colorless voice. "They always have to have it hammered out of them, and you'll have to swallow the regular medicine if you play much professional baseball."

The gage had been flung down between them; henceforth, although they might dissemble before others, they would make no effort to deceive each other regarding their feelings. If Lefty were really ambitious to get on professionally, it would seem that he had perpetrated a shortsighted piece of folly in incurring the enmity of his manager. Nevertheless, rising to his full height to face Hutchinson, he had something further to say:

"Doubtless, sir, there are other managers like you; but, for the good of the game, I hope there are not many."

For something like thirty seconds, Hutch did not stir or move his eyes from Tom Locke's face; but he was confronted by a pose equally statue-

like and a gaze even steadier and unflinching, and presently, struggle against it though he did, his lids drooped.

"You shall regret those words," he declared, without altering his tone a particle. "Your baseball career in the Northern League will be short; at Princeton it is ended."

He went out, leaving behind him the paper he had brought.

When he was alone, Lefty took a long breath.

"You are right," he muttered; "at Princeton, it is ended." And he laughed queerly.

Hutchinson left the hotel to get the air, which he seemed to need. A man who had never known what it meant to feel deep and lasting affection for any human being, he could hate with an intensity as deep and dark as the Plutonic pit. Seeking a private booth at the central telephone station, he called up Mike Riley, with whom he made an appointment to "talk over business," guarding his words, lest the girl at the switchboard, listening, should hear something her tongue could not refrain from tattling. This done, Hutch walked a while, and felt better.

He was, of course, not the only one who had read the disturbing piece in the *Bancroft News*; already numerous people in Kingsbridge were dis-

cussing that item, which provoked no small amount of alarm, and caused Henry Cope to be bombarded all that forenoon with questions he could not, or would not, answer, putting him before midday into such a reek of perspiration that he felt as if he had taken a plunge in the river.

With a copy of the paper in his pocket, Benton King lingered a few minutes at the post office, and was rewarded by the appearance of Janet. He showed her the paper, and saw her cheek pale as she read the brief article.

"That ought to convince you," he said.

"It does not!" she exclaimed, handing back the paper. "It is a wretched slur, such as might be expected from Bancroft."

"Where there's smoke, you know."

"I'm truly ashamed of you, Bent. I thought better of you."

He flushed under the stinging remark, but stood his ground.

"You will be forced to believe, in the end, Janet."

"As long as Mr. Locke has denied that he is Paul Hazelton, I shall believe him. He has the eyes of an honest man. He has the face of a man who cannot lie."

"I confess that he is an excellent actor, able to

assume a most deceiving air of innocence and veracity."

"Benton King, I refuse to talk with you about him. Where's your proof that he is not what he claims to be? You have only your unjust suspicions to back you up. I should hate to think you were concerned in the spreading of this preposterous story printed in the *Bancroft News*. Why, if I thought that—"

"I am not concerned in it, to my knowledge; I give you my word of honor on that. When I first suspected that he was Hazelton, of Princeton, I made some inquiries concerning him; but I have carried nothing to Riley. Since he denied in your presence that he was Hazelton, I have not spoken of him to any one save you."

He was very desirous that, though she knew him to be determined to expose Locke as an impostor, she should not get the impression that he, King, would resort to the smallest underhanded device to overthrow a rival. He had told the man plainly that he had sent for a picture of Paul Hazelton. It was to be a fair and open fight to the finish.

"Very well," said Janet, "I believe you. But do not come to me with any more hearsay gossip about Tom Locke. When you have proof I will listen."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE FRAME-UP

AT nine o'clock on Saturday evening, two men sat talking in confidential tones in the Bancroft office of Lawyer Rufus Kilgore. The lawyer himself was not present; he had not even seen Bob Hutchinson follow Mike Riley into that office. But he had loaned Riley the key, with the full knowledge that some sort of a secret conclave was to be held there.

Riley was paid to manage a winning team, and he was at liberty to negotiate what conspiracies he chose for Bancroft's advantage; but, for the ease of his conscience, Kilgore wished to know as little as possible about such plots.

On this occasion, Hutchinson had made the appointment with Riley, specifically stating that no third party was to be present during the interview. In his heart bitter rancor toward Tom Locke gnawed like canker; his hatred for the man who had indiscreetly told him the fearless truth concerning his own treacherous character was like a wound that would not heal. Alone with Riley

in that office, with the door locked, he unhesitatingly announced his determination to "put the knife into Lefty." Mike listened, grinning his satisfaction.

"What's happened?" he asked, leaning back in the creaking swivel chair and elevating his big, flat feet on the open, littered desk. "You and him been havin' some sort of a diff'runce?"

"The cub dared to shoot his face off to me," explained Hutchinson. "I told him his baseball career at college was ended, and that it would be mighty short in this league. I shall notify the proper authorities at Princeton, and furnish proof that he is a professional, and I propose to put him on the blink here so that no team in the Northern League can use him."

Riley suddenly looked doubtful.

"Now, look here, Hutch," he said. "Why not put him on the blink as far as Kingsbridge is concerned, and let us have him, if we can get him? As long as you get your dough for managing, you don't care a rap whether the Kinks win or not. If he can keep up the pace he's set, he'd be a mighty valuable man fer Bancroft."

"No," returned Hutchinson coldly and grimly; "after what he's said to me, I'll not give him the satisfaction of holding a job anywhere in this

league. Don't you see, Riley, if he were to come over to you and be used successfully against Kingsbridge, he might think that he was getting back at me? I've made up my mind to put him down and out, and when it is done I intend to let him know I did it. It will benefit you if he is barred entirely, and that should be sufficient to make you ready to help put him to the mat. You don't really need him, anyhow."

"Mebbe not," agreed Mike. "I'm out after a southpaw right now that can make this college lefty look like a frappéd lemon, and I've got my left-hand hitters practicing against a kid left-hander with speed and curves, so that they can pound that kind of pitchin'. Didn't know but my claims to him might fall through, y'see."

"Then," questioned the treacherous Kingsbridge manager, "you haven't any real claim? You haven't a letter from him speaking of terms, or anything like that?"

"I haven't," confessed Riley. "I writ him twict, but I never got no answer. It made me sore to think that old doughhead, Cope, should beat me to it, and I made up my mind to bluff the thing through as fur as possible. Didn't calc'late the youngster, knowin' how it would bump him at college, would relish the advertisin' he was bound

to get, and thought mebbe, to hush it, he might give in, admit I did have a claim, and come over to us."

"Not in a thousand years," said Hutchinson; "not unless you've really got a claim. He's just bull-headed enough to fight it out. I saw that by the way he met me when I showed him the piece in the *News*. He wouldn't admit that his name was Hazelton."

Suddenly Riley let his feet fall with a thud to the floor, the swivel chair swinging forward with his huge body, and brought his clenched fist down on the desk.

"By thunder!" he exclaimed.

Hutchinson looked at him expectantly.

"By thunder!" repeated Mike. "Perhaps it ain't!"

"Isn't what?"

"Perhaps it isn't Hazelton. I have private information that, being cornered fair and square, he has denied it flat."

For a fleeting moment Hutchinson seemed startled out of his usual cold indifference, but he quickly recovered.

"Preposterous," he said. "The fellow must be Hazelton."

"I dunno. I reckoned so myself, but—"

"Look here, Mike, if he isn't, why should he let

this controversy over him go on? Then, there's Cope, who thinks—"

"Nobody in the Northern League knows Hazelton. Even Cope may be fooled."

"How? He signed Hazelton to pitch."

"But even he had never see the man. He made arrangements entirely by letter. What if Hazelton, not caring to come himself, sent a substitute? Jupiter! If that's how the land lays, this Locke would have the laugh on ev'rybody when the truth came out. We'd all feel like a man caught tryin' to spend plugged money."

Hutchinson pondered. The possibility suggested by Riley was something that had not occurred to him, but, although he could perceive that such a thing might be true, a brief bit of meditation led him to reject it as improbable.

"You're wrong," he said. "I'll stake my life that he is Hazelton."

"We've got t' be sure," growled the Bancroft manager. "It won't do to go ahead until we are. Say, I wouldn't have him put one like that over on me for a cool thousan'. I'd be guyed aplenty. Think of us howlin' about Hazelton and claimin' that Locke was him, only to have it pan out that we'd been makin' a lot o' jacks of ourselves. I wouldn't hear the last of it in a year."

“Then I’ll find a way to get the proof that he is Hazelton,” promised Hutch. “But when we’ve got it, what are we going to do? I thought you had some semblance of a claim which would give us an excuse to get together and sign an agreement not to use him, either one of us.”

“And have him go over to Fryeburg or Lakeport?”

“No. We could fix that by faking up a claim that, on account of crookedness on his part, he was suspended. A man suspended can’t be taken up by another team in the same league; they’ve got to wait for his release, and we’d both refuse to release him. Settlement of the matter could be hung up until the season was over.”

Riley thumped the desk again, grinning at his worthy associate in conspiracy.

“You’ve got a head, Hutch,” he complimented. “You alwus was clever at framin’ up jobs, and I reckon, together, we could put it through. If I knowed f’r sure Locke was Hazelton, and had some of his handwritin’—well, I cal’late I could get a letter faked that would cook his goose. I know a clever guy who’d do the pen-work. You bring me proof that he’s Hazelton, together with a workin’ sample of his penmanship, and we’ll put him down, both shoulders to the carpet. I’ll have

old Cope weepin' briny tears for his lost wizard."

"It's a bargain," said Hutchinson, rising. "But it must be agreed that we simply hang him up so that no team in the league can use him. Leave it to me; I'll settle the question regarding his identity, and get the sample of penmanship you want. He's practically a dead one this minute."

"If I land that new southpaw, I won't need him, anyhow," said the Bancroft manager. "But don't lose no time, Hutch."

"I won't. I'm too eager to fix him to dally."

It was late before Hutchinson retired that night, but still he lay awake a long time, and finally a method by which he could possibly get hold of some of Tom Locke's handwriting flashed through his mind.

"Ah!" he breathed. "Now I can sleep. He attended church last Sunday; if he does so tomorrow, I'll see if I can't find a way to look over the contents of that writing desk in his room. It's possible I may find something more than a mere specimen of his chirography."

With this comforting thought, he soon drifted off into slumber as peaceful and unbroken as that of a healthy man who has no reason for a single troubled qualm.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LETTER IN THE DESK

SHORTLY after Sunday morning breakfast, Hutch had a private talk in his room with one of the two bell hops of the hotel, following which he complacently strolled down to the veranda, where, lounging in a comfortable chair, he presently saw Tom Locke come forth and depart on his way to church. When the pitcher had vanished, the man rose and returned to his room.

In less than fifteen minutes there came a light, nervous tap on the door, and, at Hutchinson's invitation to enter, the bell boy, looking a trifle pale, glided in.

"Well, did you get the pass-key?" questioned the manager.

"Yes, sir," answered the boy; "I slipped it off the hook when the clerk wasn't looking, but if I'm caught I'll be in a peck of trouble. I wouldn't do this, only—"

"Only you need the tenner I offered. Here it is."

He passed over a ten-dollar bill, which the boy took with a hand that was a trifle unsteady.

"Now, go ahead down the corridor, and open the door when nobody's looking, but don't act so sneaky that you'll be suspected if some guest should see you," ordered Hutchinson. "Leave the door ajar a bit. The chambermaid for this floor is working at the front of the house, isn't she?"

"Yep; she was in Number Eleven when I come up. If I'm caught—"

"Quit that, and get a move on. When I come out, I'll close the door. You can lock it afterward. Stir yourself now."

A few minutes later, stepping almost as lightly as a cat, Hutchinson left his own room, and moved down the corridor until, at the far end, he saw the door of Number Twenty-two, which was Tom Locke's room, standing the least bit ajar. In a moment he had passed inside, closed the door quietly, and shot the safety bolt.

The room had not been made up, but it was the maid's rule to take care of the front of the house first, and Hutch. was not particularly fearful of interruption. If she should come, she would find the door bolted, and, unless she had seen him go out, doubtless she would think Locke still there.

Hutchinson wasted no time. Testing the desk, he found it locked, whereupon he produced a huge bunch of keys, muttering:

“If one of these won’t do it, I’ll have to break it open. I’m going into it now, anyhow.”

Selecting the keys most likely to fit such a lock, he found that the fourth one tried served his purpose. The bolt clicked, and he opened the lid. Although he was moving swiftly, apparently he was still as cool and unagitated as Locke might have been himself while opening the desk with the proper key, which the pitcher carried in his pocket.

Immediately on lowering the lid of the desk, Hutchinson’s eyes discovered something that gave him a feeling of satisfaction. It was an unfinished letter, written on the paper of the hotel, pushed back and left lying under the pigeonholes.

“This ought to tell me something,” muttered the man. “It’s a letter the fellow hasn’t found time to finish, and, at least, it will furnish the needed specimen of his handwriting.”

In the most informal way, without giving the full name and address of the person for whom it was intended, the letter began: “My dear Grandall;” and went on to give an account of the experiences of the writer since his arrival in Kingsbridge.

The chirography was strong and manly, and extremely easy to read, although not at all of the "copper-plate" variety.

Hutchinson, running through the letter swiftly in search of the proof he desired, gave little heed to the quaintly humorous description of the pulp-mill town, "baseball batty"; and he skimmed through the somewhat graphic, self-chaffing account of the first game pitched by the writer, in which, as he laughingly confessed, he began with "a combination attack of stage fright and buck fever." These paragraphs, however, he perused without missing a word:

As I say, we have a good team, and I think it should be a winning one if our manager is on the square and wants it to win. For some reason I do not trust the man.

At our first meeting I was seized by a powerful instinctive feeling of dislike and distrust. He is cold as a fish and bloodless as a stone, with a voice as flat and monotonous as the Desert of Sahara, and his frosty, unfeeling eye is not the eye of an honest man.

He does not belong in Kingsbridge, but has been hired, like the players on the team, and I should say that he is a person who stands ready to sell himself at any time for a price.

If it should happen that, near the close of the season, Kingsbridge stands between Bancroft and championship honors, Bancroft will cop the pennant easily enough by dickering on the "q. t." with Mr. Robert Hutchinson—or I'm away off my trolley.

It was characteristic of the man reading the letter that he did not show his rage by flushing. His

nose, however, became a livid, sickly white, and his thin lips were pressed somewhat more closely together, causing his mouth to resemble a straight, colorless scar. His face was that of a most dangerous man who would strike at an enemy's back in the dark.

There were other paragraphs that Hutchinson read without skipping a line:

Oh, by the way, old fellow, I have met the most charming girl it has ever been my good luck to run across. I'm not going to try to describe her, because I simply lack command of language to do so, and by this confession alone you can see that she has me going some.

Her name is Janet Harting, and she is the daughter of a hard-shell parson whose pet aversion is baseball—a man who, according to report, believes all baseball players must be either children, fools, or ruffians.

Janet, however, has attended boarding school, and she's a thoroughbred fan, though her father raises such a rumpus about it that she doesn't get out to many games.

Benton King, son of the man who has metamorphosed Kingsbridge from a four-corners settlement into a hustling, rip-roaring young city-to-be, is mightily interested in Miss Janet. Judging by appearances, she is not exactly averse to his attentions, which, considering his prospects and the fact that he seems to have anything around here in the eligible-young-man line left at the post, is no source for wonderment.

Sometimes I think I'd like to see if I couldn't give him a run for his money, but—well, you know how I'm situated, and—what's the use!

“Not a bit of use, young man—not a bit,” muttered Bob Hutchinson. “When I get through

with you, it isn't likely you'll have a reputation that'll make you particularly attractive to a discriminating young lady."

Hutchinson was much disappointed when he came to the abrupt breaking off of the unfinished letter in the middle of the last page, and failed to find anything in it that would prove that Locke and Hazelton of Princeton were one and the same.

He decided at once to purloin the final page, leaving the others as he had found them. He would relock the desk when he departed from the room, and Locke, missing the final sheet, might fancy that somehow it had slipped from the others and been tossed into the near-by wastebasket, to be carried off by the maid.

In one of the pigeonholes were two letters. Both were addressed on the envelopes to "Mr. Tom Locke." The first one opened contained only the post-card picture of a strikingly pretty young girl, who was laughingly exhibiting some fetching dimples. Across the bottom of the picture was written: "To 'Big Bub,' with love, from 'Tid.'"

A look of understanding drifted across Hutchinson's face as he gazed at the picture, and, returning it to the envelope, he observed:

"So that's how you're 'situated,' Mr. Tom Locke; that's the reason why you are refraining

from trying to give King a run for his money with the parson's daughter. If you were going to hang around this town long enough, I'll guarantee you would forget about 'Tid' and make an effort to get into the running, just the same. It may be lucky for King that you'll be going away very soon."

He returned the picture to the pigeonhole, and investigated the contents of the other letter, consisting of a single sheet of paper, on which a brief note had apparently been scrawled with much haste.

The handwriting was masculine, and there was no date line to tell from whence it had come, but the first two words were enough to give Hutchinson considerable satisfaction. They were: "Dear Hazelton." With some trouble, the manager deciphered what followed:

Don't worry any more about the Kernell case. Wyloft & Pettengall have informed me that it will surely be settled out of court. I'll have further information from them in a few days, but I'm sure there'll be no necessity for you to come back here until you get through with your baseball job.

Hope you make good up there in the bush, though you were afraid when you left that your arm had lost some of its cunning. Let me know what success you are having.

Ever yours,

GRANDALL.

"Ah!" breathed Bob Hutchinson. "As proof, I think this should satisfy Riley. The envelope

is addressed to 'Tom Locke,' but the writer calls him Hazelton in the message. That settles it. I don't need the envelope, but I think I'll keep its contents for Riley's eyes. Now, we can go ahead without hesitation, and sink the harpoon to the hilt."

CHAPTER XXXI

TOM, TOMMY AND JANET

IN a grove upon the bank of the log-choked river, Tom Locke lay stretched on a carpet of brown pine needles, reading from a little book. The sunshine, sifting through the trees, cast upon the ground golden fleckings, which wavered and danced as a soft breeze stirred the upper branches.

By turning his head and lifting his eyes, Tom could catch a glimpse, through an opening, of the distant village and the mills below the dam, silent and dozing in the peaceful warmth of the Sabbath afternoon. So absorbed was he, however, that he rarely paused to give attention to that view.

He scarcely heard the sounds of children's voices in the grove; sounds which gradually drew nearer. When at last he did take note, it was because their close approach had aroused him, but, trusting he would be left undisturbed in his glade, he resumed his reading.

Suddenly he was startled into full attention by a voice which called:

"Tommy, Tommy, where are you?"

The voice, clear, mellow, flute-like, gave him a singular thrill that brought him up to a sitting position. The book dropped from his hand, forgotten. No child's voice was that; he had heard it before, coming from lips whose fair curve and fullness he could not forget, and, though he chided himself for his folly, its echoes had haunted him even in his dreams.

He waited, breathless, expectant, desiring to hear the call repeated, and that desire was quickly gratified.

"Tommy, Tommy, why don't you answer me?"

He was tempted to answer, but that was unnecessary; for the branches parted, and she appeared in full view, pausing instantly on beholding him, her blue eyes wide with surprise, her flushed cheeks quickly taking on a deeper tint.

She was dressed in white, an occasional ribbon adding a livening bit of color, and the sight of her figure, poised against that dark-green background, slender, startled, entrancing, set his heart thumping. Nor was his voice quite natural as he hastily rose, bowed, and asked:

"Did you call me, Miss Harting?"

"Oh—oh, I beg your pardon!" she returned,

laughing nervously. "You gave me a start. I didn't know you were here."

"I'm glad I am," he asserted. "Just now I'd rather be here than anywhere else in the world. It is I who should beg your pardon for startling you."

There could be no question, his bearing and words marked the gentleman; if doubts had troubled her, they fled at once. In the garb of the baseball field he had looked well; in a suit of gray tweed, negligee shirt, and russet shoes, he looked far better. His soft hat lay on the ground near the book. She, too, felt her heart beating fast.

"When I sought this quiet spot," he went on, as she still remained silent, "I scarcely anticipated the pleasure of beholding a wood nymph. And hark!—the pipes of Pan!"

The sound of music came from some spot near at hand.

"It's Tommy's harmonica," she laughed. "Tommy," she called again, "where are you, you rascal?"

She was answered by an elfish burst of laughter, followed by a rustling in the bushes and the appearance of a head of tousled, reddish hair, a freckled, snub-nosed face, and a pair of mis-

chievous, dancing eyes that widened at the sight of Locke.

"Gee!" said the boy, coming into full view. "I didn't know he was here. Where's the rest of the bunch, Miss Janet?" One soiled hand gripped the harmonica.

"You see what you did by running away, Tommy," said the girl, in mock severity. "You made me disturb Mr. Locke."

"For which offense, Tommy," smiled the young man, "I'll stand treat at the candy store the first chance I get. While not in the least desiring to encourage insubordination, I must say I'm glad you ran away."

Janet flashed him a look, and her eyes dropped before his gaze. She could feel the flush in her cheeks.

"I came out for a walk with some of the little fellows of my Sunday-school class," she hastened to explain. "Tommy Murphy is always up to his pranks. One day he got lost in the woods, and they didn't find him until eleven o'clock that night."

"Never got lost," denied the boy instantly. "My old man give me a larrupin', 'n' I jest run off to go West an' fight Injuns, but it come dark 'n' I had ter camp in the woods, 'n' they ketched

me 'n' took me back home. My maw, she didn't let my paw larrup me no more fer that, fer she knowed I was desprut, an' I'd said that I'd run erway ag'in if I was thrashed any more. When a desprut man says that, folks better be careful what they do to him."

With some difficulty, Locke refrained from a delighted outburst of laughter. "I quite agree with you, Tommy," he said. "There have been occasions when I was desperate myself."

"I know, I know," eagerly cried the little fellow. "I seen that fust game you pitched ag'inst Bancrof'. Gee! You must 'a' been desprut with the bunch howlin' at ye 'n' you plumb off your pins; but you jes' got together an' made ther Bul-lies' look like er lotter shines. I see all ther games. It don't cost me nuthin'; I know er loose board, 'n' I crawl t'rough the fence. Say," he added, in sudden alarm over the indiscretion of this confession, "you won't gimme erway, will ye?"

"Never," promised the pitcher solemnly. "I register an oath to be silent as the grave."

"Come, Tommy," said Janet, "we must go back to the others."

"Aw, w'ats the use o' hurryin'?" objected the boy. "They're comin' this way now." He

lifted his voice in a shrill shout: "Hey, fellers, come on! This way. Here we be."

There were answering calls, and the sound of running feet and crashing bushes. Seeing a look of uncertainty upon the girl's face, Locke hastened to reassure her:

"Let them come, Miss Harting. This is as good a place as any for them to amuse themselves."

"But you—we have disturbed your reading."

"There are things more interesting than books, and I was really a bit lonely. See, there is a clean log on which you may sit, and, if you don't mind, I'd like to talk to you. You'll certainly be well chaperoned. Of course, if you object to my company and—"

Making the grove ring with their whoops, six youngsters came bursting into the glade. Tommy quickly satisfied their surprised curiosity regarding the young man they found talking to their teacher.

"That's Lefty," he said. "We jes' run ercrost him here by accidunt. He's ther greatest pitcher that ever bent er slant over the slab round these parts. Me brudder Bill says so."

"Aw, g'wan!" retorted a barefooted boy, who was a bit larger and somewhat older. "My brud-

der Sam says Lefty ain't so much, only he's a southpaw, an' Bancroft's gotter lot of left-hand knockers; an' that's how he bothers 'em."

"Looker here, Jimmy," said Tommy ominously, thrusting the harmonica into his pocket, "your brudder Sam was talkin' through his hat. Anyhow, he dunno beans 'bout baseball."

"He knows as much as your brudder Bill."

"You're another!"

The two boys flew at each other, Tommy getting in the first crack and following it up hotly; but Locke's strong hands quickly separated them and held them apart.

"He said you warn't no good as a pitcher," panted Tommy. "Lemme go, an' I'll make him eat his words."

"Aw, let 'im come," sneered Jimmy, "an' I'll knock ther block off him."

It was Janet who succeeded in shaming them into a temporary truce; but, although they promised to fight no more on Sunday, both muttered dire threats of what they would do to each other the first time they met on a week day.

"Aren't you ashamed to fight?" asked the girl, reprovingly.

"Nix," replied Tommy. "A feller ain't no good that can't fight. Me brudder Bill says that

Lefty can fight jest as well as he can pitch, an' that's goin' some."

"I am afraid," said Janet to Locke, "that you have set a bad example."

"But not willingly," he quickly declared. "I hope you do not think I would engage in a public fist fight from inclination. I assure you that the knowledge that you witnessed that wretched affair has caused me no little mortification."

"You were justified," she said. "I saw it all, and there was no manly way by which you could have avoided it."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE INITIALS

HE thanked her for the words, and secured his hat and book as they walked slowly toward the log. Tommy was again blowing away at his harmonica, Jimmy was sulking, and the others fell to amusing themselves with a game of hide and seek. Janet sat on the log, and Locke seated himself near her.

“What were you reading?” she asked curiously.

He gave her the book, and she glanced at it. It was a well-thumbed volume of “The Merchant of Venice.”

“My favorite when I read Shakespeare,” he said. “I don’t know why, but I have read it over and over. At the moment when I heard you calling, I was reading Bassanio’s raptures on finding Portia’s portrait in the leaden casket.”

Leaning forward a bit and looking steadily at her, he quoted:

“‘Here are sever’d lips,
Parted with sugar breath: so sweet a bar
Should sunder such sweet friends. Here in her hairs

The painter plays the spider and hath woven
A golden mesh to entrap the hearts of men.'"

His voice was low and soft, yet full and deep. Again her eyes drooped before his. One shapely white hand toyed with a loose bit of bark.

"You quote well," she said, compelling herself to speak calmly, almost carelessly. "You should be a teacher of elocution."

"The task would be agreeable indeed," he returned, "if I could choose my pupil."

"You speak in the singular."

"Which," he declared instantly, "is not at all singular, the situation considered. Had I my choice, I'd not seek a pupil beyond this little glade."

"Oh, if you were to pick one of my Sunday-school class, I'm afraid you would not find the task particularly agreeable. Teaching elocution to Tommy or Jimmy or any of the others would be thankless work."

He smiled. "I'd not care to seek so far, yet I know it is presumptuous for me to fancy that I could teach *you*."

She flashed him a smile that went to his head like wine and made him long to imprison the dainty hand that was still toying with the bit of loose bark. There was a brief silence, broken

only by the echoing cries of the romping children.

"Tommy, Tommy!" she cried suddenly, "play 'Marching Through Georgia.' Just listen, Mr. Locke; Tommy plays very well for a little fellow. Don't you think so?"

"To tell the truth, I don't, but, if you say so, I'll swear he plays divinely."

"You have a habit of speaking the truth always?"

"It is my intention to follow the practice when possible."

"Do you think a lie is ever excusable?"

"One of the leading divines in the country has said that a harmless white lie is permissible when it shields a friend from truth that would cause pain."

"Do you know there are those who think you were not truthful when you denied that you are Paul Hazelton, of Princeton?"

"I believe that there is one, at least, who thinks so. The doubt in Benton King's eyes was too plain to escape me."

"But you are *not* Paul Hazelton?"

"I am not. I hope you believe me, Miss Harting."

"I do," she answered. "But I can't understand why they persist in trying to make out that

you are he. The *Bancroft News* printed a piece that would lead people to believe it."

"Which is evidence that there are those besides Benton King who wish to believe it, and, of them all, doubtless Manager Riley, of Bancroft, is the most eager; for he pretends to have some sort of a claim, according to the rules of the Northern League, upon the services of Paul Hazelton. If I am the Hazelton in question, he means to take me away from Kingsbridge, even though he may fail in compelling me to pitch for the Bullies. That's his game, Miss Harting. When he has pushed it to the limit, he'll find that he's barking up the wrong tree, and the laugh will be on him and the others who have fooled themselves in the same way."

Although he smiled a little, his words were spoken with such sincere frankness and honesty that she was shamed by the thought that even the slightest shadow of doubt had clouded her confidence in him. A man with such steady eyes, set well apart; such a mouth, unmarred by the soiling touch of guile; such a voice, deep, strong, yet suppressed, like the softened notes of an organ—that man could not lie.

"I am beginning to understand," she said hastily. "It is just like those Bancrofters; they are

determined that Kingsbridge shall not get ahead of them at anything. They are terribly wrought up because we have beaten them at baseball, and they'll do anything to weaken our team. I—I'm glad they can't get you away from us. Do you think we have a good chance to win the pennant this year?"

"If the games are played on their merits, with no underhanded work, I see no reason why Kingsbridge should not stand as much chance to win as Bancroft. You did not come out to the Lakeport game."

"How do you know?"

"I looked for you."

"But—in all that crowd—"

"I am sure you were not there; if you had been, I should have seen you."

"No," she answered, glowing at the knowledge that he had taken so much trouble to seek for her in the crowd. "I have not seen a game since the first one you pitched. Father raises such objections that I have thought best to stay away, even though he has not positively forbidden me to attend. If I can get an escort, I shall do my best to persuade him to let me see the next game when Bancroft plays here. Every one in Kingsbridge seems to think it will be a great battle."

"Bancroft comes Wednesday, this week."

"And you will pitch?"

"I don't know; I presume so."

"Oh, I'll see it unless father positively refuses to let me go. I *must* see that game! I hope you pitch as well as you did before."

"I hope so myself," he laughed, "although for a time in the first inning I was almost led to believe I couldn't pitch at all."

"I'll never forget it," she breathed. "It was dreadful. The crowd was howling at you so, and you seemed utterly unable to get the ball over. I confess that I, too, thought you were useless as a pitcher. But when you redeemed yourself, and the crowd became satisfied that you could hold Bancroft, how quickly the howling turned to cheers! I can hear them now, crying: 'Oh, you Lefty!' It was splendid!"

Janet's cheeks were bright, and her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm reawakened by those exciting moment. Watching the movements of her lips, revealing flitting glimpses of perfect teeth; listening to her voice, as sweet as that of Basanio's beloved maid; entranced by the violet light of her eyes, all aglow with earnestness; he was stirred as never before in all his life.

Then and there came the knowledge that she

was the one girl for him. He longed to tell her, but words fit to do him such service seemed impossible to find; he doubted if they were contained in any language.

The first words were trembling on his lips when suddenly one of the romping children uttered a cry of pain, followed immediately by other cries, bringing Janet to her feet in alarm.

"What is it?" she called.

"It's Jimmy," answered Tommy Murphy, appearing from behind some bushes. "He's cut his foot on somep'n. It's bleedin' fierce."

Locke was at Janet's side when she reached Jimmy, who was sitting on the ground, surrounded by the other little boys, and holding one of his bare feet. It had been gashed by a broken bottle hidden by fallen leaves and vines.

Without hesitation Janet dropped to her knees to do what she could, but Tom was equally swift and unfaltering in action. Whipping forth a spotless handkerchief, he knelt to bind up the injury.

"It will be best to take him to a doctor right away," he said, "for there may be pieces of glass in the cut. Let me attend to this, Miss Harting. I can do it alone; I won't need any help," he declared, as he observed that all the color had departed from her cheeks, leaving them very pale.

"Let me help," she urged steadily.

"Yuh—yuh don't think I—I'll bl-e-bleed ter death, do ye?" sobbed Jimmy.

"Hardly as bad as that, old chap," smiled Locke, as he wound the handkerchief round the foot and drew it tight. "There's no danger at all. We'll have you fixed up all right. It doesn't hurt much, does it?"

"Aw, I don't care a rap fer ther hurtin', but it bled so like thunder that it got my goat," was the reply.

Janet, watching, saw Tom bring two corners of the folded handkerchief together to tie them. On one of those corners her eyes beheld some initials, plainly and distinctly worked; so plain and distinct were they that there could be no possible mistake as to what they were. She stared at them, wondering, for the letters were "P. H."

"There you are, old man," said Locke cheerfully, when he had knotted the ends of the handkerchief securely. "Never mind if the blood does come through; the doctor will stop that pretty quick. Now, come on, and I'll take you to him pickapack."

He lifted the little fellow lightly, and swung him to his back. Janet rose, and followed, the children, chattering, trailing after.

“P. H.,” she whispered to herself. “Those letters surely do not stand for Tom Locke.”

But there was another name which they served—a name which Benton King had declared rightfully belonged to the man who called himself Tom Locke.

CHAPTER XXXIII

KING ABOUSED

BENTON KING, politely invited—nay, urged—to call on Bob Hutchinson at the Central Hotel, dropped round that same Sunday afternoon, out of passing curiosity, and listened with swiftly growing interest to what Hutchinson had to tell.

“I knew it!” exclaimed King triumphantly, when the vengeful manager had finished. “I knew it all the time, but I didn’t have the proof. For the last few days I’ve been expecting a letter that ought to contain all the proof anybody wants.”

“What more,” inquired Hutchinson, “do you want than what I have given you? I have shown you the letter written to Hazelton, which was mailed to him in an envelope addressed to Tom Locke. That certainly nails it on him for fair.”

“Yes,” said Bent, with a nod, “but I’ll have something more convincing than that for a skeptical person, if I’m not badly mistaken. He was a fool to deny his identity in the first place.”

“Right; especially to his manager. We protect college guys who confide in us, and let them play under fake names if they wish, but this man has been crooked with me, and there’s no reason why I should cover him up. You should have seen the other letter I spoke of, the one he was writing. I read it, thinking he might give himself away. He knocked me in it, and he soaked you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. He said you were a fellow with more money than brains, thanks to a rich father. He also referred to a certain young lady in town by the name of Janet Harting; said you were chasing round after her, but he proposed to get busy and cut you out, as she was the prettiest girl he had seen around here, and would serve to amuse him while he had to stay here.”

King’s face was dark; his hands clenched, and his eyes flashed. A singular ring of yellowish pallor formed round his mouth, his lips drew back from his teeth, and he cried:

“He denied, in her presence, that he was Hazelton, and I know what she thinks of a liar. He won’t amuse himself much with her when I am through with him.”

Thoroughly satisfied, Hutchinson walked slowly toward his window, which looked out on the main

street of the town. He had begun the work of undermining the man who had dared express to his face an unreserved opinion of him as a manager, and when he, Hutchinson, was finished, the so-called Tom Locke would be down and done for.

"I have your promise, Mr. King," said Hutch, "to say nothing concerning the source of your information. I was determined to know the truth about that man, but you can understand that the general public might not approve of my method of obtaining it."

Suddenly he brushed back one of the coarse lace curtains, and leaned forward to look out of the window.

"I declare," he said, without the slightest change in his voice, "if here isn't our man now, carrying a kid on his back; and, on my word, the young lady in question is with him."

King crossed the room, almost at a bound, snatching aside the curtains. True, Locke was passing on the opposite side of the street, bearing on his back a little boy, whose left foot was bound about with a bloodstained handkerchief. Janet walked beside him; the other children straggled along behind.

There was a roaring in Benton King's ears, and a reddish mist seemed to flow across his vision like

a filmy waterfall in the evening sunlight. Far and wide in lumber land, old Cyrus King was known as a man with a violent and ungovernable temper, deadly dangerous when aroused, and, in this respect, at least, Benton was his father's son.

"I'll do up that sneaking, boasting fellow!" he snarled wolfishly, sick to the core with the rage that possessed him.

"Evidently," said Hutchinson, heaping fuel to the leaping flames, "he has begun to amuse himself with Miss Harting."

"I'll get him!" cried Bent again, burning and freezing alternately with fury that made him tremble. "And I'll make quick work of it!"

He wheeled from the window, but Hutch turned with equal swiftness and shot out a pair of hands that fastened upon him.

"Hold on," said the manager. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to fix him—to fix him! Hands off! He can't make a jest of that girl! Amuse himself with her, will he? His pleasure will be brief! Let me go!"

Exerting all his strength, Hutchinson swung the infuriated young man to one side, giving him a thrust that made him stagger. Springing to the door, the manager turned the key in the lock,

removed it, and put it into his pocket. Again he faced King, one open hand upheld, palm outward.

"Open that door!" shouted Bent, his eyes glaring, a bit of white foam on his lips. "What are you trying to do?"

"I am trying to prevent you from making a fool of yourself," answered the other calmly. "Listen to me a minute. Have you any regard whatever for Miss Harting?"

"Have I? I'm going to protect her from that wolf. Let me out!"

"Do you want to involve her in a scandal? In your present state of blind madness, you would rush after them and attack the man upon the street. A common scrap over a girl on Sunday—you know what that means. The burg would buzz with it; the young lady would feel herself humiliated and disgraced. Do you think you would gain favor in her eyes by such folly? Besides, you are no match for that fellow; you ought to know it, for you saw him whip Jock Hoover, and Hoover's no slouch of a fighter. You would not make a very heroic figure in that sort of an affair."

"I can fight, if necessary," panted Benton. "I discharged two men last week because they left work to attend a ball game against my orders. One of them was a dago, and he came back, drunk,

to cut me up. I took his knife away from him and threw him out. I can fight, and I'm not afraid of a coward who hides behind a fake name."

"Even if you whipped him, you'd stand a good chance of putting yourself in Dutch with the girl, who surely would be mortified by the notoriety the affair would bring. Have some sense; wait a bit, King, and cool off. With a clear head, you'll see that there are other and far better ways of fixing the man."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

GIVEN THE LIE

THE calmness of the speaker had its effect on the trembling young fellow, who stood there, hands clenched, breast heaving, slowly beginning to realize that it was his duty to do nothing that would humiliate the girl and involve her in the speculations of scandal-loving tongues.

“Let me out now,” he said, after a few moments, “and I’ll meet Hazelton as he is coming back. Miss Harting’s name shall not be mentioned.”

“That’s a bit more reasonable, but further thought ought to convince you that there’s nothing but folly in getting into a fist fight with him, in which you are sure to come off second best. Why give him the satisfaction of whipping you? You know it’s more than an even gamble that he would.”

Hutchinson looked sharply at King.

“Now, listen to me. You say the girl hates a liar, and he has sworn in her presence that he is

not Hazelton," said the manager. "If you prove to her that he lied, isn't it likely she'll drop him like a hot flatiron? In that way, you'll protect her, all right, and you'll put the blade into him, after which any comparison on her part between you and the man who tried to deceive her will be decidedly to your advantage."

"Yes," admitted King, "perhaps so, but to think of him trying to carry this thing through in such a brazen—"

"He has simply besmirched himself, and his sojourn in Kingsbridge will be brief. Mike Riley has in his possession a letter from Paul Hazelton, which, as it is an effort to jack Riley up in the matter of salary—Riley having made Hazelton an offer to pitch for Bancroft—will establish Bancroft's prior claim to the man. As near as I can learn, old Cope got Hazelton by paying him a preposterously big sum."

"If he goes to Bancroft, he'll still be pitching in the league and appearing regularly in Kingsbridge."

Hutchinson permitted a frosty smile to fade across his face. "He'll never pitch for Bancroft or any other team in the Northern League. Riley is sore. I am telling you in confidence that we have talked the matter over and agreed that Haz-

elton shall be suspended indefinitely for tricky work. That will put an end to his meteoric career in these parts. All that was needed was proof positive that the man was Hazelton, and I have it."

"When will he be suspended?"

"Some time this present week, when a meeting of the league association will be called in Bancroft especially to consider his case. Doubtless you know that Riley has already served notice on us that all games won by Kingsbridge with Locke on the mound will be protested. As a pitcher around here, the fellow is as good as a dead one this minute. He has killed himself in college baseball, also."

"Which serves him right. But what will Kingsbridge do for a first-class pitcher?"

"I have one man coming, and another on the string. The first one I expect to arrive by Tuesday or Wednesday, at the latest. If I am left to manage this team, with no interference from Cope, I'll manage it right. He has messed things up beautifully and given us a bad start."

They talked until the scheming manager saw that King, though brooding, had calmed down; then, satisfied with what he had accomplished he unlocked the door.

Hutchinson descended the stairs with King. At the foot of the flight they encountered Tom Locke, just coming from the hotel office in company with Larry Stark. The pitcher had been telling Stark something, and both men were laughing. Believing he knew what Locke had been saying, and that it concerned Janet Harting, the lumber magnate's son was again obsessed with white-hot anger.

"You'll laugh out of the other side of your mouth in a day or two, Hazelton!" he rasped.

"I beg your pardon," Tom returned, flushing. "My amusement does not concern you, King; and will you be good enough to call me Locke?"

"No, I will not; I'll call you by your right name, which is Paul Hazelton. Deny it here, if you have the nerve."

"Very well, I do deny it."

"Then you're a liar!"

He did not wait for the retaliation the insult seemed certain to bring, but leaped, with the final bitter word, at the accused man's throat. Stepping sideways like a flash, Locke caught him as he sprang, whirled him round, slammed him up against the near-by partition, and held him there. The quickness and strength of the pitcher was amazing.

Instantly Stark sprang to part them, exclaiming:

"Don't hit him, Tom—don't hit him!"

"I haven't any intention of hitting him—this time," answered Locke. "But that was a nasty word he used, and he should be more careful."

Hutchinson took a hand. Two or three other men came quickly from the office and joined in holding the struggling, panting lumber king's son in check, Locke having released him and permitted himself to be pushed back.

"I say he's a liar!" shouted Benton. "He knows he lies! I'll prove it for everybody. Take your hands off me, and I'll fight him here or anywhere else. I dare him to meet me like a man! He hasn't the courage! He's a coward!"

"You're plumb anxious to get your face broke, ain't ye?" snapped Larry Stark. "You wouldn't last a minute with him. What's eating you, anyhow?"

The hotel proprietor indignantly announced that he did not propose to have a fight in his house.

"I'm surprised, Mr. King, that you should start trouble here," he said. "I ask you, as a gentleman, to quit it."

"All right, Mr. Sawyer," said Bent. "As you

have put it up to me that way, it goes. Take your hands off me, everybody. I won't touch him again—here."

"I didn't notice that you touched him at all," grinned Stark.

"But," declared King, smoothing his rumpled coat and straightening his necktie, "I'm not done with him, as he is due to find out. I'll get him yet, and get him good."

After giving Locke a parting look of venomous hatred, the young man turned toward the open door and passed out.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE PHOTOGRAPH

BENTON KING sat in his office at the mill, opening the morning mail, which had just been brought him by a boy. His face wore a heavy frown, and he ripped open the envelopes viciously with the steel paper cutter.

The sounds of the mill—the creaking of the windlass drawing the big sticks up the run, the scream of the saws tearing through logs, the pistol-claps of fresh-cut boards tossed flatly upon other boards by the laborers—annoyed him, and he rose and kicked shut the connecting door, which had been left slightly ajar.

Resuming his seat at the desk, his eye fell on a square, flat package at the bottom of the letters remaining unopened, and he caught it up eagerly.

“Ha!” he breathed, after looking at the address. “Fletcher’s handwriting! He got it! This is what I sent for.”

Even as he was tearing off the wrapper, however, hesitation and fear came upon him. What if it should not be what he wanted? What if the

photograph he knew the wrapping contained were not that of the man he had accused? The possibility gave him a gripping throb that was keen as the thrust of steel.

“It must be,” he muttered huskily. “I can’t be wrong. He has put up a big bluff, but he’s the man.”

His hands were not wholly steady as he finished removing the wrapper of brown manila. The picture was faced with cardboard, and this he flung aside, revealing the printed likeness that had been caught by the camera. Snatching it up, he turned eagerly to permit the light to fall full upon it. His face flamed with triumph; his mouth opened, but no sound issued forth; his clenched fist rose and fell on the desk as if the blow settled the doom of a mortal foe. After a time he laughed; it was not a pleasant laugh.

Presently, when he had gazed until satisfied that even the most obtuse or most obstinate could not behold it and express a doubt as to the almost perfect likeness of the picture to the man who called himself Tom Locke, a likeness far stronger than a mere verisimilitude, he turned again swiftly to the letters that had not yet been opened. Running them over, he selected one on which the writing corresponded to that upon the wrapper that

had been removed from the photograph. No time was wasted in opening it.

NEW YORK, June 28, 19—.

DEAR BENT: Found an opportunity yesterday to run out to Princeton and get the photograph of Paul Hazelton, which you desire so urgently, and I am sending it under separate cover, letter rates, so it will travel along without delay. Why didn't you tell me more fully what you want of the thing? Night letters by wire are cheap, and even a brief explanation would not have left me puzzling my brains in weather that will hatch eggs without the assistance of either setting hen or incubator. You're lucky to be up there in the open pastures on the border of the big woods, where you can breathe without fancying you are stoking an Atlantic liner.

Crisply,

FLETCH.

"Good old Fletch!" chuckled Bent. "I'll write him about it later. He has done me a great service, and Janet, also. This settles the matter beyond any question or dispute."

He looked at his watch; it was nine-thirty. Late enough for him to see Janet, he decided, and, thrusting the letter and the photograph into his pocket, he rose from the desk, leaving the remainder of the mail unopened.

The screams of the mill saws followed him into the streets of the town, and at times it seemed as if their cries of conquering triumph took on something resembling entreaty or warning, but his hurrying feet did not falter, and soon he was ring-

ing at the parsonage door. The white-capped maid answered and said she would find out if Miss Harting could see him. He entered and waited.

He did not have to wait long before Janet appeared, his heartstrings giving a tug as he beheld her in a simple morning gown. In her blue eyes there was a look of wonder, not wholly free from apprehension.

"I—I could hardly believe you were here—so early," she said, scanning his face as if seeking to find there some explanation of this unusual call. "Has—has anything happened?"

"I beg your pardon for coming at this hour," he returned, "but I simply couldn't wait. I hope you understand me and believe me, Janet, when I say that I am your sincere friend, something I hope to prove to your entire satisfaction. Taking the privilege of a friend whose motives cannot be questioned, I must tell you how much I regret having seen you yesterday with the man who calls himself Locke."

Her face did not harden, for there was nothing of hardness in her nature, but it changed, warning him that he was treading on most dangerous ground. She lifted her hand quickly, retreating a step.

"If that is what brings you here, I am sorry you

came. I met Mr. Locke quite by accident while out walking with the children. Jimmy Bryant cut his foot frightfully on a broken bottle, and Mr. Locke bound it up and brought him in to the doctor. I hardly know why I should make this explanation."

"You could not be seen with the man without arousing more or less comment, and you should know what the gossips of this town will say."

"Mr. Locke has satisfied me that he is a thorough gentleman, and unwarranted gossip of narrow-minded persons who are eager for something to talk about cannot frighten me." The color was in her cheeks now.

"A gentleman!" cried Bent, losing his head for a moment. "That two-faced sneak a gentleman! That man who has boasted already that, as you happen to be the prettiest girl in town, he proposes to amuse himself with you! He thinks himself a crusher, the sort that girls get stuck on. He has the post-card photograph of one now, who signs herself 'Tid,' doubtless a silly creature he has flattered and fooled with his lying tongue. And now he proposes to get you on the string and—"

"Stop, Benton King!" Her cheeks had lost the flush, and there was something in her voice

he had never heard before. "Whatever your motive, you are making a blunder. How do you know these things you are saying?"

CHAPTER XXXVI

CRUMBELED CASTLES

FEARING what she might think of him for dealing with a man like Hutchinson, he dared not tell her just how the knowledge had come to him; but he swore it was true, that he knew it was true, and begged her to believe him.

“And, though he has denied it, he is Paul Hazelton. They have the absolute proof, and Mike Riley holds a letter of his that will bar him from baseball in the Northern League. There’ll be a meeting called this very week, and he’ll be suspended.”

“I do not believe it. I told you not to speak to me again about him until you could show proof that—”

“I can! I have it here!”

Exultantly he produced the letter and photograph; the latter he held before her eyes, and she looked at it, speechless.

“The picture of Paul Hazelton, of Princeton,” he said. “Does it resemble Mr. Tom Locke?”

“Where—where did you get it?” she asked in

a husky whisper, taking it from his hand with nerveless fingers that nearly let it fall.

"I told you I had sent to a friend, asking him to get Hazelton's picture for me. He went to Princeton for it; here's the name of the Princeton photographer on it."

She had hoped that there might be some doubt; that, even though the photograph resembled Locke, there might be some question as to whether it was not the counterfeit presentment of a person who looked like him. But, with it before her eyes, that hope sank and died; it was the man.

Watching her face, King felt certain he had won at last. He took the picture, and placed the open letter in her hands. She tried to read it, but the lines ran into a blurred mass, and finally, with a choking sensation in her throat, she handed it back, endeavoring to keep him from seeing how hard she was hit.

He sought to crush back and control his exultation; did his best to prevent any touch of it from creeping into his voice.

"While I am sorry, Janet, that you were deceived, even for a minute, by the fellow, I am also glad that no real harm has been done. He has been exposed in time. I knew from the first that he lied brazenly when he denied that he was Hazel-

ton, but he certainly can assume a plausible manner which might fool almost anybody. Henry Cope knew, all along, that he was not what he represented himself to be, but, on account of Riley's claim, and to protect Hazelton, he would not tell the truth. It is useless for him to hold back any longer. I hope you do not blame me, Janet; I'm sure you won't when you have time to think it all over calmly. I care for you more—much more—than I have ever let you know, and for that reason I—”

“Please don't say anything more to me now,” she entreated, her voice low but steady. “You were right.”

Half turning away, she put out her hand; he seized it quickly, and found it cold.

“I'll not say anything more now,” he breathed, close to her shoulder, holding the hand fast in his grasp; “but some time, Janet—some time when you are ready to listen—I'll have something more to say.”

On the street he swung off with a free, vigorous stride, his heart beating high. He had won; he was sure of it. The knowledge of her interest in the man, which he had feared might develop into something deeper, had led him to realize the full extent of his own regard for her. She was a poor

clergyman's daughter, and he was the son of Cyrus King, but the little god had winged his arrow straight, and the wound was deliciously deep.

Twenty minutes after King left, Janet, having donned hat and wrap, came out and walked swiftly down the street. Her face was chill and sad; she was deserted by hope; yet she would see Henry Cope.

Behind his counter, the grocer peered at her over his glasses.

"Mornin', Janet," he said cheerfully. "'N-other ruther nice day."

"Mr. Cope, I'd like to speak with you a moment privately."

Surprised, he took note of her pallor and the girl's troubled look. Her voice had an unusual sound. Pushing up his spectacles, he came from behind the counter.

"Step inter my office," he invited.

In the office he urged her to sit down, saying she looked tired; but she preferred to stand.

"I'll bother you only a minute," she said.

"No bother at all—no bother. What can I do? Anything the matter?"

"I have come to ask you, confidentially, about—about the man who is called Tom Locke." She half turned her head away.

"Eh? Oh, him? What you want t' know?"

"Mr. Cope, I want you to tell me the truth. You need not fear that I will repeat anything you say. You have always been my friend, and now, as such, I ask you to answer my question. I hope you'll not refuse or put me off."

"You bet I've alwus been your friend, little girl," he returned earnestly. "What's the question?"

"You engaged Mr. Locke for the baseball team, and you know who he is. They are saying he is a Princeton College man by the name of Hazelton. Tell me, Mr. Cope, if that is true."

"Now, what makes the difference who he is?" spluttered the grocer, frowning. "I'm bein' pestered to death about him."

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to pester you. I gave you my word I would not repeat anything you told me, but if you will not answer my question—"

"Hold on, Janet; I ain't said I wouldn't answer it. I know you won't tell if you say ye won't, and, anyhow, it's beginnin' to look like he'd have to sail under his own colors before long. Yes, Miss Janet, he's Paul Hazelton. I agreed t' keep mum 'bout it so's he wouldn't git inter a mess 'bout pitchin' for his college; but what's the use, with

Mike Riley raisin' high jinks an' claimin' he's got a holt on the boy, and even settin' the newspapers to buzzin'? I'm ruther sorry for Hazelton, but I s'pose he knew he was takin' a chance when he come here."

"That's all," said the girl; "thank you. Now, I hope you'll not tell anybody that I came to you to inquire about him?"

"Not a peep, little girl. He's a mighty nice feller, I'll say that fer him. Don't seem to have no bad habits, an' goes t' church, an'—"

But she did not wait to hear him enumerate the virtues of the man who had looked straight into her eyes and lied without a tremor; the man who was proud of his conquests with the fair sex, and had boasted that he would amuse himself with her while in Kingsbridge. What a despicable creature the fellow was! She left the store.

On the way back home, Janet passed several persons without noticing them at all, but she kept her face set with the fixed purpose of preventing any one who saw her from imagining that she was fighting back a flood of tears. Glad that her father was out for a morning walk, she avoided the maid, hurried to her room, locked the door, and permitted the flood to burst the restraining gates.

After a time, having "cried it out," she sat in an easy-chair near the window, watching a mother robin on her nest in the tree outside.

She was not thinking of the robin, however; she was thinking of yesterday and the meeting in the woods—a day she had thought the happiest of her life. She was thinking of the manner in which Locke had looked at her with those clear, honest brown eyes, and how she had thrilled beneath that look. She was thinking of his voice as, sitting on the log and leaning toward her, he had quoted the words of Bassanio, causing the heart, now cold and heavy in her breast, to leap and throb until it seemed that he must hear its joyous beating.

No man had ever stirred her like that, and something told her that no other man could so stir her again. And all the time he had been playing with her—amusing himself!

That day, "the happiest of her life," was a day to regret; a day to forget—if she could forget it. Would the sun ever again shine as brightly? Would the woods ever seem so shadowy cool and inviting? Would the flowers ever be so fair and sweet?

She had loved the world and everything in it, and her blood had danced in her veins, and her feet had longed to dance, despite it being the Sab-

bath day; her very soul had seemed to sing with a joy as wide as eternity.

Now the sun was shining outside her window, but there was something gone from its golden glamour; her blood that had danced flowed chill in her body, and her heart was full with a pain too great for it to contain.

“A dream,” she whispered dully—“nothing but a dream. It is over!”

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE BELL BOY

ON Wednesday Bancroft was to play again in Kingsbridge, and Thursday was to be the "middle of the week lay-off" for both the Bullies and the Kinks.

Tuesday's early mail brought Henry Cope a letter bearing the Bancroft postmark, and he opened it somewhat nervously. As he apprehended, it contained a communication from Anson Graham, president of the Northern League, giving notice that there would be held at the office of Rufus Kilgore, in Bancroft, on Thursday evening, at eight o'clock, a meeting of the league directors to consider the protest of Manager Riley relative to Paul Hazelton, "playing with Kingsbridge under the assumed name of Tom Locke."

"By gum!" growled the grocer disgustedly. "They actually do mean business. We're up ag'inst it. The boy better know 'bout this right away."

He found Locke making ready to start for Fryeburg, where the team was to play that afternoon.

The young man seemed strangely depressed, and his face wore a deep frown as he read the notice, which Cope had handed him. The grocer anxiously regarded the expression on the pitcher's face.

"Well?" he asked, as Tom returned the notice.

"It is fortunate," said Locke grimly, "that I fancied this meeting might be called on short notice, and made preparations for it."

"Hey? You've made preparations?"

"Yes."

"Whut sort o' preparations?"

"Don't worry, Mr. Cope; I shall be ready for them, I think."

"Then you're dead sartin old Riley ain't got no holt on ye?"

"How many times," asked the young pitcher impatiently, "must I tell you so, Mr. Cope?"

"You know it's got round somehow that you've denied p'int-blank that you're Hazelton, and some folks—they's alwus that kind in ev'ry town—are sayin' they reckon you lied," stammered the grocer. "You ain't never denied that your name's Hazelton, have ye?"

Tom Locke frowned, but made no answer to the question.

"As fur's I'm concerned," said Cope, "when

they've tried to corner me, I've dodged or refused to answer. It's too bad, boy; I'm mighty sorry it's all goin' to come out who ye be, but 'twarn't my fault. I've kep' my part of our agreement."

"I haven't any doubt of that. It's simply the result of unfortunate circumstances and the determination of somebody to do me a bad turn. Mr. Cope, I'm not a trouble breeder, but, as you have used me square and I am genuinely interested in the team, I'm going to give you a tip to keep an eye on your manager. Nor does this come wholly, or even mainly, from the fact that I do not like him personally; I have reasons to believe that he is not on the level."

"Hum!" grunted the grocer; "we hired him on good recommendation, but I don't mind tellin' you privately that I've got a feelin' myself that he ain't to be trusted too fur. He's fer puttin' you on the bench until arter this fuss over you is settled, an' that don't sound good t' me. I want you to pitch agin' Bancroft ag'in to-morrer."

"And I want to pitch against them," said Tom warmly; "but you'll find that Hutchinson will object."

"As long as you insist that they can't count out the games that you win, I'm goin' to set on the bench myself an' see that you pitch to-morrer."

“Good! I hope I’m in my best form, for I hear that Riley has had his men batting industriously in practice against a left-handed pitcher. Being left-handed helped me against his left-handed hitters at first before I had them sized up; but I’ve made a study of them for weak spots, and, though they are called sluggers, he has no Wagners or Lajoies—men who can bump any kind of a ball that comes within reach of their bats. They have their failings, every one of them, and, with good control and good support, I should be able to take another fall out of them.”

The door of the room had been left slightly ajar by Cope. Outside that door a hesitating bell boy stood listening to the talk of the two men. Hearing some one turn the knob of a door farther along the corridor, the boy hastily lifted his hand and knocked. At Locke’s call, he pushed the door open, and entered.

“Hello, Sam,” said the pitcher. “On the bed there—that suit needs pressing; take it to the tailor, will you, and tell him I want it back to-night? Here!”

He extended a silver half dollar, but the boy, who had gathered up the suit of dark-blue serge from the bed, drew back, looking confused.

“What’s the matter, Sam?” asked Locke, a bit

impatiently. "You've been doing some little favors for me of late."

"I'd rather not take it, sir," said the boy, his lids lowered and his gaze on the floor. "I hope ye don't mind, sir."

"Why, I don't understand—"

"You—you was good to my little brother, Jimmy, when he cut his foot, and—and I'd rather not take anything, sir."

Locke laughed for the first time that day, slipping the piece of silver into the genuinely unwilling hand of the boy.

"I reckon I owe Jimmy and his friends something, instead of the shoe being on the other foot," he said enigmatically. "So Jimmy is your brother? I didn't know that. You haven't a high opinion of me as a pitcher, have you, Sam?"

"Oh, I was jest talkin' to hear myself talk," answered the boy quickly, his face turning crimson. "Did Jimmy tell you that?"

"I overheard it quite by accident. How's his foot?"

"Oh, he ain't caperin' round on it much yit; but it'll be all right pretty soon. I wisht you'd take this half back. Paw, he asked the doc, and the doc, he said there warn't nothin' t' pay for tendin' Jimmy's foot, 'cause you had paid; an' I'd

like ter do somethin' to sorter make it square."

"All right; keep the half now, and we'll begin afresh. Now that I know I can do it, I'll impose on you frightfully; I'll keep you hopping for me in great shape. Say, hustle along and get that suit to the tailor, or he'll not have it pressed for me to wear this evening; and I may want it." He swung the door wide open, pushed the boy out, and closed it behind him.

"Fust time," observed Henry Cope, "I ever knew a Bryant t' try to refuse money. They're a pretty shif'less, worthless bunch, that family."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

“AND DID NOT UNDERSTAND”

A SHORT time later, with his playing suit in the hand bag he carried, Locke left the hotel and started for the railway station, where he would join the other members of the team, all of whom, save Hutchinson and himself, were stopping at a boarding house. As he swung down the street, Janet Harting came out of a store and turned toward him. He saw her, and his heart jumped. She saw him, and in a moment she turned squarely around and hastened the other way, vanishing beyond the first corner.

He knew she had seen him this time and deliberately avoided him; there could be no question about it. The evening before he had come upon her suddenly on the street, lifted his hat, and spoken; but she had passed on without a word or a token to betray that he had been observed.

Although it seemed impossible then that she had failed to see him, he was not positive; now, however, he knew, and the knowledge left him breathless and dazed. When he reached the cor-

ner beyond which she had disappeared she was far along the street, and hurrying as if in great fear that he would pursue her.

“It’s too much for me,” he murmured. “It’s got me guessing. There’s no getting around it, she dodged me. Why? She saw me last night, and did not speak. Why? I can hardly believe it of her. What have I done? She is the last person I’d ever fancied would do anything of the sort.”

He did not long remain in doubt, for he was not a dull-witted man. The controversy about him was the cause of it all; she had heard what every one in Kingsbridge who took the slightest interest in baseball had heard, and she believed that he had spoken falsely to her. Impulsive, indignant, scornful, she wished to have nothing further to do with a man who could look straight into her eyes and tell her an untruth without a blush or as much as the turning of a hair.

“That’s it,” he said. “There’s no other explanation. I must call on her this evening, after we get back, and tell her the straight truth.”

The truth! If he had not been truthful, was he silly enough to fancy penitence would help him now?

The day proved tiresome and wretched for Tom

Locke, and it was far from satisfactory for his teammates, with Fryeburg winning through a ninth-inning rally that tied the score and a batting streak in the tenth which earned them the run they needed, with only one out. Stark, seeing the pitcher had wilted, and fearing the batters who were coming up, asked Hutchinson to call Lefty in to save the day; but the manager grimly refused.

The train bore the defeated players back to a late supper in Kingsbridge, for up there supper was the evening meal. On the way, Jack Hinkey asked if any one had heard anything about Bancroft's new pitcher, and the others confessed that they had not.

"Feller tole me t'-day," said Hinkey, "that Riley had signed a new twirler who'd be run in agin' us t'-morrer. An' he's a port-side flinger by the name of Craddock. Anybody ever hear of him?"

They confessed that they had not. Locke was the only man who did not answer. Sitting some seats ahead of the others and on the opposite side of the car, he was gazing glumly out at the whirling landscape, his face as dark as the purple shadows hovering at the base of a distant line of hills.

“Hey, Tom,” called Larry Stark, “did you get what Hink was telling us?”

Locke started, shook himself a bit, and turned.

“I was thinking just then,” he said. “What was it?”

They told him, and he acknowledged that he knew of no pitcher by the name of Craddock.

“They say he’s a hot article,” said Hinkey. “Feller that tole me ’bout him seemed to think we was goin’ to git up ag’inst the real thing t’-morrer.”

“What you tryin’ to do,” growled Sockamore, “frighten Lefty? Look at him. He’s fergot about Craddock a’ready.”

Locke was again gazing out of the window in a preoccupied, moody manner.

“Whut’s the matter with him?” wondered Hunchy Oulds. “He’s been like that ’most all day. He must be in love—or sick.”

“Same t’ing,” grinned Labelle.

“Hope he don’t go gittin’ off his feed now,” muttered Hinkey. “He’s due t’ git his bumps some time, but I’d like ter see him pull through t’-morrer, ’specially if they do spring a new pitcher on us.”

“Maybe,” said Reddy Crandall, “Hutch won’t work him to-morrow. I was told by a Fryeburger

that there was a meetin' comin' on for Thursday to settle whuther Lefty belongs to us or not, and maybe the games he's pitched won't be counted."

"They can't throw them out!" snapped Stark savagely. "They've got to count them. And if we lose Locke we're going to be in bad."

"You mean Hazelton, don't ye?" grinned Hinkey. "They say it's settled that that's his right name. As a rule, I don't think much of college guys, but I own up that Lefty is some pitcher, and we'll miss him."

Despite his words, his tone was not suggestive of worriment. Hinkey was one of the men brought to the team by Bob Hutchinson.

Tom Locke did not eat much that night. He hurried to the dining room at the Central Hotel. Two cups of coffee, hot and strong, made the greater part of his meal. They steadied him.

Dashing up to his room, he found the blue serge suit, freshly pressed and carefully laid out on his bed. It took him twenty minutes to make a complete change, even though he was possessed by an almost feverish desire to hurry. And, as a rule, when he hurried he could do it in half that time.

Taking a final peep at himself in the mirror, he extinguished the light and went out. When bidding him adieu on Sunday, the girl had invited him

to call ^{at} some time, and he proposed to do so this evening.

As he drew near the parsonage, however, he faltered, and his pace slackened. She had shunned him upon the street; would she not refuse to see him now?

“She must give me a chance to explain,” he muttered desperately. “Surely she’ll do that. I can’t believe she’ll decline to see me for a few minutes, at least.”

Locke’s pulse beat rapidly. With his handkerchief he wiped his forehead. It was ridiculous, of course, for a man like him to flush and shiver like a big boy suffering from his first attack of calf love; but, try as he might, he could not steady himself as he approached the cottage and discovered that, though the curtains were drawn, there was a light in the parlor.

Perhaps Benton King was there! Well, what of it? Was he the man to turn back and leave the field to a rival? Were King there, it was all the more reason why he should make haste to put himself right in her eyes. His jaws set, he followed the walk to the front door, and rang.

One of the parlor windows, near by, was open, but the shade was drawn well down, so that anybody within the room could not be seen by a per-

son outside who might seek to look in. As he turned in from the street, he had fancied he caught the sound of voices drifting out through that window, and one was, he believed, that of Janet.

Presently the maid came, and he asked for Miss Harting. "I haven't a card," he said. "Please tell her it is Mr. Locke, who would like to see her a few minutes."

He was left standing in the hall, which was lighted by the soft glow of a shaded lamp. In a brief time the maid returned.

"Miss Harting is engaged," she said, "and cannot see you."

It seemed that his heart stopped beating, and he stood quite still, unwilling to believe it could be true. The maid opened the door. He passed out with the step of a somnambulist.

So, after all, she was that sort of a girl! Only the thoughtless and shallow render judgment without a proper hearing and an investigation. He had thought her something more than a girl easily swayed and swept away by every light, shifting wind; but it now seemed that he had invested her with imaginary qualities and a character which she did not possess.

The door closed behind him. His feet threatened to drag as he walked toward the gate. Sud-

denly he stiffened at the sound of a laugh heard through the open window. His teeth clicked, his hands clenched, and every nerve in his body seemed to jerk taut as a bowstring. King was there—laughing!

He had turned to face the window, and for a few seconds he stood perfectly rigid and motionless. He struck no pose, made no gesture; but he, too, laughed, silently.

“Last time we met,” he breathed at length, “you called me a liar, Benton King, and I held myself. If you were to repeat that word to me to-night, I’d knock you down in your tracks.”

His step was steady enough now as he walked away. For a moment he thought of returning to the hotel and writing her a letter, stating the truth briefly; but he dismissed the idea almost immediately.

“She’ll find out in time,” he said; “for the whole of Kingsbridge will know after the meeting Thursday night. When she does find out, perhaps she’ll be sorry for her mistake, but it will be too late.”

CHAPTER XXXIX

BANCROFT COMES TO CONQUER

NEVER before, even though it was the middle of the week, had such a crowd of Bancroft fans accompanied the team to a neighboring town. When the train stopped they began hopping off the cars, like fleas from the back of a cat to which insect powder has been applied, and in a few moments the station platform was packed with them, laughing, joking, confident of what the afternoon held in store.

In short order they swarmed into every restaurant in town. Having satisfied their hunger, they went forth into the streets of Kingsbridge to wait for the hour of the game, some of them to seek citizens who were willing to back the local team with real money.

But Fancy Dyke and two associates, provided with rolls of the "long green," had struck Kingsbridge by an earlier train and raked the place for bets with a fine-tooth comb. Kingsbridgers who had money they were willing to risk sought the assurance of Henry Cope that Tom Locke would

pitch; and, with this guarantee, they proceeded to "take a chance."

Before the gates opened that afternoon, more money had been posted than ever before on a single game in the Northern League. For, while the milltown people had heard that the Bullies would present a new left-handed slabman, the promise that Locke would do the tossing for the Kinks left them still with a feeling of assurance undisturbed by the least uncertainty.

Not that they believed there was no chance of losing, but their faith in Lefty was so great that it seemed at least a five-to-one shot in Kingsbridge's favor; and a man who would "squeeze his roll" with such an opportunity staring him in the face certainly lacked sporting blood.

That afternoon, as the hour of the game drew on, only the unyielding strictness of foremen and bosses kept the mills running, the workmen almost threatening to desert in a body. Some of them slipped away, even though they knew they were inviting discharge by doing so.

Naturally, the curiosity to see Bancroft's new pitcher was very great, and there was a mighty craning of necks on the bleachers and in the stand when the visitors appeared for practice.

The man whose name had been given as Crad-

dock was easily seen, being over six feet in height, and having amazingly long arms and legs; in fact, he seemed to be nearly all arms and legs. He was not a handsome person, with a hatchet face and a huge beak of a nose, while his ears stood out like fans on either side of his long, narrow head. He carried his shoulders hunched forward, and walked with a queer bobbing movement of the knees, a sort of buckling with each step. In more ways than one his appearance was suggestive of a crane.

Craddock warmed up without letting himself loose at all, giving the eager watchers no chance to get an idea of his capability by anything in that preliminary performance.

With the appearance of the home team, Hutchinson sprang a surprise. A new man came on the field with them, a bronzed, husky, rawboned man, who quickly set the crowd to speculating as to his identity. When the local pitchers began limbering their wings, one question was quickly answered; for when the stranger commenced to warm up, also, it was seen that he was a pitcher; and many a Kingsbridger hoped he would prove to be better than either Deever or Skillings.

Mike Riley, smoking industriously, stood around with his hands in his pockets, watching his players in a self-satisfied manner. His bearing was more

than encouraging for those who had journeyed thirty miles to see the Bullies win. After a time, he walked over and spoke to Hutchinson. They talked earnestly for several minutes, Riley making gestures with his clenched fist and nodding his head savagely, while Hutch shrugged his shoulders repeatedly.

When the Kingsbridge manager turned toward the local bench, he found Henry Cope standing near it.

"Well," said the grocer, "what did old Riley have t' say? Tried ter browbeat ye, didn't he?"

"Oh," said Hutchinson, "he reasserted his claim to Hazelton, and said we'd surely lose this game out of the count if we persisted in pitching the man. You can see, Cope, that it's no bluff; the meeting is called for to-morrow night. I've got Ringling, a new pitcher, here, and he's clever. Don't you think we'd better use him?"

"I notified you," said the grocer irritably, "that Locke would pitch this game, and he'll pitch it. Put him in."

"All right," growled Hutchinson, in exasperation, "have your own way." As he sat down on the bench, he added to himself: "You pig-headed old fool!"

So it was Locke who went on the slab when the

umpire called "play," and Bancroft promptly sent Harney jogging forth to the pan with his pet bat on his shoulder. Tom was given a rousing cheer by his admirers.

"You know what to do to 'em, Lefty," yelled a man on the bleachers. "You're the boy fer us. We're backin' you."

Harney drove his spikes into the dry ground and squared himself, his bat held high and ready. His posture was that of a man who welcomed speed, and rather preferred that the ball should be up around his shoulders; therefore, Locke opened with one across his knees on the inside corner. True, Harney hit it promptly, but he only batted a weak grounder into the diamond, and Labelle, grabbing it quickly, whipped him out at first by a wide margin.

"Just as easy as ever!" whooped a delighted Kingsbridger. "Pick off the next one, Tommy, old top."

Trollop held his bat low, so Locke kept the ball high and close, causing it to jump, and the Bancroft center fielder slashed at three without making even a foul.

"Some pitchin', Lefty, some pitchin'!" was the cry.

Wop Grady, his face knotted and puckered, as

usual, slammed at the first one handed him, and hoisted a high foul, which Oulds smothered close to the wire netting that protected the people in the stand; and Kingsbridge gave Locke a cheer that resembled a cowboy yell more than anything else.

Every eye seemed to be turned on Bancroft's new pitcher as he teetered awkwardly out upon the diamond. The ball was thrown to him, and he whipped three or four scorchers to Harney, at first, before Labelle was ready to bat; but not until he toed the slab to pitch to the batter did he put his remarkable delivery on exhibition.

Suddenly he swung far backward, pivoting on his left foot and shooting his right arm and right leg into the air, while his left hand carried the ball far, far over until it seemed that he was trying to touch the ground with it. Up he came and forward on to his right foot, his pitching hand, sweeping through the air to send the ball burning across a corner of the pan.

"*Nom de tonnerre!*" gasped Labelle, his eyes bulging, his bat hanging poised.

"Strike!" cried the umpire.

CHAPTER XL

PINWHEEL MURTEL

THE great Bancroft crowd laughed. They had come to Kingsbridge to see their new southpaw show the Kinks something about pitching. Incidentally they had made arrangements to take home with them various sums of money which the foolish Kingsbridgers had wagered on their team.

Bangs whipped the ball back, and Craddock again went through with that remarkable delivery, looking, as one man expressed it, "as though he was all arms 'n' legs." Again the ball bit a corner off the plate, and Labelle, fascinated by the pitcher's gyrations, swung too late.

The only delay was that caused by the movements of Craddock preliminary to pitching, and he did not waste a single "teaser" on the Kinks' first hitter. The third one was high, with a sharp slant on it, and the little Canadian whiffed out.

"There's pitchin' fur ye!" yelled a Bancrofter. "What d'ye think o' *that*?"

"*Nom de tonnerre!*" said Labelle again, as he

retired to the bench. "Where he come from, de circus?"

Stark, following, fouled three times, but eventually the Bancrofter twirler outguessed him, and sent him, fanned, to take his place beside Labelle.

"Whut's he got?" asked Reddy Crandall, pawing among the bats.

"Curves and speed," answered Larry, in a low tone. "Don't get to watching his delivery and forget to watch the ball. Go to him! He can be hit."

But Reddy could not hit him that time, and the Bancroft crowd howled as their new projector fanned the third man in succession. There were some who began to prophesy that the Kinks would be shut out without a hit on their own field. There are always wise heads who make foolish prophecies early in every game.

The second inning opened with Bancroft's left-handed hitters coming up, and Locke, knowing they had been practicing against a left-handed pitcher, worked with the utmost care and judgment, his change of speed being most effective, as it caused two of the four men who faced him to bump weak grounders into the diamond, to their complete undoing.

With two down, Bernsteine, standing well back

from the plate, with a long bat grasped near the end, stepped into a "roundhouse," and lined out a pretty single. It did no good, however, for Lisotte banged a grasser into the clinging paws of Labelle, and Bernsteine was out at second on a force.

"You all hit him, boys," cried a Bancroft man. "You'll straighten 'em out by and by, and lose the balls over in the slashings at the foot of Bald Mountain. He's due to get his bumps."

Craddock continued his remarkable work, and, one after the other, Anastace, Hinkey, and Lace were mowed down, even as their comrades had fallen in the first round.

The Bullies were urged to fall on Locke, and Bangs led off with a long drive to center, which Sockamore retrieved on the fly. Craddock did not seem to be strong with the club, and he made a laughable exhibition by seeking to hit the low ones on the inside corner, where Locke kept the ball for a strike-out. Harney got one to his fancy, through a momentary lapse on the part of Locke, but, by tall hustling out in the left garden, Reddy Crandall picked the globule out of the air.

"You're hittin' him now," declared the encouraging Bancroft fan. "Keep it up; they can't get 'em all. You'll put the blanket on him yet."

The delight of the visitors may be imagined as Craddock finished Kingsbridge's list by handing the last three men upon it the same medicine he had given the first six. Three innings had passed, nine men had faced him, and not one of them had even hit the ball into the diamond. It began to seem that the man who had prophesied no hits and no runs for the Kinks might not be such a fool, after all.

Locke's manner was almost trancelike as he toed the slab at the beginning of the fourth. His first ball was wide, but Trollop caught the second one on the seam and pounded it for two sacks, bringing the Bancroft rooters up, roaring. They continued to roar, as Grady bunted and sacrificed Trollop to third, where, with only one out, he was in position to score on the squeeze play if the Bullies saw fit to try it.

They did try it, but, knowing what was coming, Locke pitched to Mace high and close, and Mace bumped a little pop fly straight into Lefty's hands. Holding the ball a moment, Locke smiled at Trollop, who made ludicrous efforts to stop and turn back toward third. The roaring of the Bancrofters died away in a disappointed groan as they saw the ball tossed to Fred Lace for the third put-out.

"Oh, this is something of a game!" crowed

Stark, capering toward the bench. "It's about time we came to life and touched that gangling port-sider up a few. Stop watching his contortions, Labelle. This is no vaudeville performance; you're here to play baseball. Try to hit him, anyhow."

"You bet!" growled the Canadian. "I hit de ball dis time; you watch."

Nevertheless, although he slashed viciously, he did not graze the first one.

Suddenly Reddy Crandall, who had spent his time on the bench staring at the long-gearred pitcher, struck his thigh a resounding slap.

"I've got him!" he declared excitedly. "I've spotted that guy! I know him now! Craddock, hey? No wonder them Bancrofters come up to this town to-day loaded with bettin' money. Craddock! Why, that's 'Pinwheel' Murtel, of the National League, as good a man as Matty himself, only he's got a rotten disposition, an' no manager can handle him. He's been blacklisted and outlawed time after time, but he's such a wonder they always fix it up somehow, an' take him back when he wants to come. That's Murtel, I'll bet my life on it. Fellers, we'll never score to-day with *him* pitchin'."

Stark, standing near, had ceased to swing the

two bats he had picked up, listening to the excited words of Crandall. He had never seen the famous and eccentric Pinwheel Murtel, but he had heard a great deal about the man, as, doubtless, had every other baseball player in the country.

"By Jove!" he muttered, having turned to stare at the lengthy twirler. "I believe you're right, Reddy."

"I *know* I'm right," said Crandall. "I've been trying to figure out who the man was, and I've got him at last. At his best, he can walk any three of us without a man down and then keep us from scoring. This game is as good as settled, and a lot of Kingsbridge sports have lost some good money to-day."

"Nonsense, Crandall!" said Locke swiftly. "Even if the man *is* Pinwheel Murtel, he isn't invincible."

"There goes Pete ag'in," said Reddy, as Labelle fanned out the second time. "Nobody's even touched him."

"What of it? The best pitchers in the business can be hit."

"But not by batters in our class."

"Yes, sometimes they can be hit by batters in our class. Mathewson has been batted and beaten by a scrub country team, at least once, according

to his own confession; and other top-notch pitchers have met the same treatment, much to their surprise.

“We’re going to fight this game through to the last ditch, I hope, whether that man is Murtel or not. There’s no knowing what may happen. At any rate, if I can hold them down, and you fellows keep on giving me the support you have, they may not get any runs. We’re not going to quit, are we, just because we’ve found out that Craddock is Murtel?”

“No,” rasped Jim Sockamore, the Indian, “we won’t quit! You’re right, Lefty; mebbe we’ll beat that bunch yet, if we support you.”

It was plain, however, that Crandall’s discovery had taken the courage out of him, and it seemed to fade away entirely as Stark, also, fanned. Reddy stood up to the plate with his heart in his shoes and swung apathetically, being sliced down without waste of energy on the part of the pitcher.

CHAPTER XLI

GONE WRONG

LOCKE muttered a single word of disgust as he rose from the bench and walked toward the pitcher's slab. On the way he stopped suddenly, staring for an instant toward some teams and automobiles down beyond the far end of the third-base bleachers. Then he walked onward, but some of the flush was gone from his face.

Hutchinson, sitting silent on the bench, had done little toward directing his players. Should the game go against Kingsbridge, as he believed it would, he was prepared to answer criticism by saying that Henry Cope's interference had made it impossible for him to rely on his own judgment and generalship.

Long before Crandall named the Bancroft pitcher, Hutch was wise to the man. He had likewise observed that Locke did not seem as efficient as usual, although good support had prevented the Bullies from hammering out runs.

"When the break comes," thought the rascally

manager, "it's dollars to doughnuts they'll get his goat for fair."

The Kingsbridge pitcher looked ill as he found the slab at the beginning of the fifth; his face was pale and set, and there was something like a glare in his eyes. He seemed to be in haste to hand Pat McGovern a pass, pitching one ball after another without pausing to steady down, though both Oulds and Stark begged him to take more time; and not one of the four he threw for Pat even grazed a corner.

Following this, he bored Bernsteine in the ribs, and two men were on the sacks, with no one down. Remembering the first game Locke had pitched on that field, the Kingsbridge crowd declined to be frightened.

"He'll steady down in a moment," they said. "Just watch him."

But in a moment McGovern and Bernsteine each moved up a sack on a weirdly wild pitch to Lisotte.

Hutchinson turned quickly to Ringling.

"Shake the kinks out of your arm, Ring," he directed. "Hurry up about it."

Oulds had called Locke, meeting him a few steps in front of the pan.

"What's biting you now, son?" he growled, heedless of the howling Bancrofters, who were de-

manding that the umpire should keep the game going. "You've got the wabbles; I don't believe you can see the rubber."

He wondered at the look in Tom's eyes. Locke moistened his dry lips.

"Yes, yes, Oulds," he said huskily; "I'm all right now."

"Well, you don't look it," retorted Hunchy. "Be you havin' a fit, or what? You've got to stop heavin' the ball as fast as you can git holt of it. Take your time, now. Don't let Lisotte bunt; prob'ly he'll try it. If they start scorin', they're li'ble to win the game right here."

"I tell you I'm all right now," declared Locke savagely. "Give me the ball."

"He's havin' a reg'ler fit," muttered the catcher, surrendering the sphere and backing toward his position behind the pan.

Lisotte squared himself again; the coaches talked excitedly, the Bancroft crowd rooted for runs; Kingsbridge was silent. Bernsteine took a long lead off second, and McGovern danced back and forth at third. Locke was taking time at last, apparently trying hard to throw off the feverish wildness that had put him into "a hole."

Swift, high, and close came the ball to Lisotte, difficult indeed to bunt safely. But the little Ca-

nuck did not try to bunt; instead, as if he knew just what was due, he met the sphere with a snappy swing, driving it humming into the field between center and right.

McGovern danced gayly to the scoring station, Bernsteine following with a rush. There was a wild riot on the Bancroft bleachers, men leaping up and down, flinging their hats into the air and yelling themselves purple in the face; for, with two runs scored, no one out, Locke apparently all to the bad, and Pinwheel Murtel in Big League form, it seemed that the game had been clinched for the Bullies.

Since coming on the field, Tom Locke had been looking for Janet Harting; somehow he was confident she would attend this game. It is likely that thoughts of her had disturbed him and prevented him from concentrating upon the work of pitching, although he had not been aware of it.

Walking out to take his position at the beginning of the fifth, however, his searching eyes discovered her blue parasol, and, beneath it, Janet, sitting at the side of Benton King in the same carriage in which he had first beheld her. As Locke looked, King seemed to be returning his gaze. The pitcher saw Bent lean toward the girl and say something, whereupon both laughed. For the

time being Tom lost his head, greatly to the advantage of the rejoicing Bancrofters.

He knew it; no one on that field knew it better. And nothing could have served better to sober him and bring him to his senses than that wicked, timely line drive by Lisotte. He saw Ringling warming up and Hutchinson talking to Henry Cope, who plainly was not feeling right. Of course, the manager was asking permission—or demanding it—to remove him immediately from the game.

“I’m a fool!” thought Tom. “I have played right into that rascal’s hand.”

CHAPTER XLII

A SUDDEN SHIFT

HE hoped Cope would not yield. Perhaps the damage was done already, but he would try to redeem himself if they did not bench him.

Hutchinson was saying:

“What’s the use to keep him in, man alive? He’s lost the game already.”

“If he’s lost the game,” returned the obstinate grocer, “what’s the use to take him out? I don’t see no sense in that. Let him pitch some more. He braced up t’other time; mebbe he will ag’in.”

Speechless with exasperation, Hutchinson turned back and reseated himself on the bench. Seeing this, and understanding that Locke would continue yet a while on the firing line, Stark ran to him, grasped him with both hands, and spoke in swift, yet steady, tones:

“Pull yourself together, Lefty; you’ve got to do it, and you can. Bangs is easy, and that man Murtel can’t hit a balloon. Put the ball over, and

take chances with them; we're behind you. Don't hurry, and keep your head."

Tom gave the disturbed captain a reassuring smile.

"I know I ought to be sent to the stable," he said; "but I'll do my level best now. Watch me."

Bingo Bangs was not much of a hitter, and the crowd saw Lefty whip the ball through a single groove three times in succession, and three times the Bullies' catcher hammered the air. After the third strike, the ball having been returned by Oulds, Locke caught a quick signal from the backstop, and wheeled, to flash the sphere like a shot into the hands of Labelle, who had dodged past the runner.

Labelle nailed Lisotte, and the two Canadians exchanged courtesies in choice patois. This second swift putout awoke some of the saddened Kingsbridgers, their sudden yells of satisfaction mingling with the groans of the Bancrofters.

"*Now* we're all right!" cried Larry Stark. "Take a fall out of old Pinwheel, Lefty. We'll make a game of this yet."

Locke's nerves were growing steadier. He had forced himself to dismiss every thought of the girl who had treated him so shabbily, and the man, her companion, who had flung him an insult and

escaped a thrashing. Until the last inning was over he would concentrate his energies upon the work in hand.

As before, the Bancroft pitcher's efforts to connect with Locke's slants were laughable; he could not touch the ball, even to foul it.

"Hold them down now, Craddock," begged Fancy Dyke from the bleachers. "They shut us out last time we was here; let's return the compliment to-day."

Murtel grinned; thus far he had seen nothing that would lead him to doubt his ability to hold the Kinks runless. Nor was he ruffled when Anastace got a scratch hit from him in the last of the fifth; for the three following batters were like putty in his hands.

On the part of Kingsbridge there was uncertainty and anxiety as Locke returned to the slab, for now the head of Bancroft's list, the best hitters of the team, were coming up to face him, and they were full of confidence. There were times, it seemed, when Lefty was sadly erratic, and were he to slump again in this game the faith of his admirers would be much impaired.

Never had Tom Locke put more brains into his pitching. He had a speed ball that smoked, and his curves broke as sharply keen as a razor's edge;

furthermore, he "mixed them up" cleverly, his change of pace proving most baffling, and his slow ball always seeming to come loafing over just when the hitter was looking for a whistler.

Harney snarled his annoyance after fanning; Trollop almost broke his back bumping one of the slow ones into the clutches of Labelle; Grady lifted a miserable foul back of first for Hinkey to gobble.

Hutchinson had temporarily deserted the bench, and the Kinks came trotting in. Observing this, Locke grabbed Stark, and whispered something in his ear, Larry listening and nodding.

"It won't hurt to try it," said the captain. "Here, Oulds."

It was the catcher's turn to lead off. He listened to Stark's repetition of Locke's suggestion; then he stepped out to the plate, slipped his hands up on the bat a bit as Murtel pitched, and bunted the first ball.

The Bullies were taken by surprise. The ball rolled slowly down just inside the third-base line, and Oulds, leaping away like a streak, actually turned that bunt into a safe base hit, to the complaints of the Bancroft spectators and the whooping merriment of the Kingsbridgers.

Locke was promptly in position, and he followed with a bunt toward first. Even as the bunt was

made the bat seemed to fall from his hands, and he was off like a shot toward the initial sack, leaping over the rolling ball as he went. Only by the liveliest kind of hustling did Murtel get the sphere up and snap it humming past the runner in time to get an assist on Harney's put-out.

Oulds was on second. Labelle, grinning, hopped into the batter's box, and astonished the spectators of the game, and the Bancroft players, as well, by contributing the third bunt, which was so wholly unexpected that he reached first by a narrow margin. And now the Kingsbridge crowd was making all the noise, the Bancrofters seeming stricken dumb with apprehension.

Murtel was angry, a fact he could not hide. For the first time he seemed, with deliberate intent, to keep the first ball pitched beyond the reach of the batter. Oulds, of course, had anchored temporarily at third, and Labelle, taking a chance, tried to steal on that pitch.

Bangs made a line throw, but Lisotte, seeing Oulds dash off third, cut it down, only to discover that the tricky Kingsbridge catcher had bluffed. The Frenchman failed in an attempt to pin the runner before he could dive back to the sack.

Locke had taken Crandall's place on the coaching line back of third, giving Reddy a chance to

get his bat, as he was the hitter who followed Stark; and it was the play to keep the ball rolling as fast as possible. Tom was laughing and full of ginger, his words of instruction to the runners sometimes sounding clear above the uproar of the excited crowd.

“Keep it up! Keep it up!” he called. “Get off those cushions! Take a lead, and score! *Look out!*” Murtel had made an attempt to catch Labelle by a quick throw, but the little Canadian slid under McGovern’s arm.

CHAPTER XLIII

A GAME WORTH WINNING

LOCKE had forgotten the blue parasol and its owner; he had no fleeting thought for Benton King; he was heart and soul in the game.

With one out, it seemed an excellent time for Kingsbridge to keep up the bunting, and attempt to score on it by the "squeeze," so Bancroft's infield drew closer and the outfielders quickly came in.

At the plate, Stark gave a secret signal, changing the style of play, and then he set the local crowd frantic by meeting Murtel's high one on the trade mark. With the outfielders playing in their usual places, that line drive would have been good for a clean single, but while they were chasing it down, Larry dug all the way round to third, Oulds and Labelle romping over the rubber with the runs that tied the score.

The whole Kingsbridge team was laughing, now, while Murtel, enraged over being outguessed and deceived, was almost frenzied.

"It's a great top piece you have, Lefty, old pal," cried Larry Stark. "That was the trick to get 'em going. Look at Pinwheel champ the bit."

But Hutchinson was back on the bench now, and he directed Crandall to hit the ball out. Reddy, trying to respond manfully, boosted an infield fly, and Stark was forced to remain on the sack while it was caught. Had Anastace, coming next, taken a daring chance and bunted, it is possible that the Bullies might have been thrown into confusion again; but he had orders from Hutchinson to hit, and in trying to do so he succumbed to Murtel's strategy, expiring in the box.

"Oh, this is some game, believe me!" shouted a Kingsbridger. "Hold 'em where they are, Lefty. You've got the stuff to do it. We depend on you."

The Bancrofters who had wagered money on the tussle were not as cocksure as they had been, and doubtless more than one, Manager Riley included, regretted that matters had not been privately arranged in advance so that it would not be necessary to rely almost wholly on the prowess of their new left-handed pitcher.

Surely their regrets became still more acute when, in the seventh, Locke showed no let-up in form, and was not even ruffled when McGovern

reached first on an infield error, the other three batters to face him going the way of all flesh.

"Oh, you Lefty!" was once more the rejoicing cry of the palpitating Kingsbridgers.

Murtel came back with a shut-out, although Hinkey led off with a scratch hit.

"Hold 'em, Lefty—hold 'em!" was the beseeching cry.

Bangs and Murtel faded like morning dew before a burning sun, but Harney got into a speedy one and banged it for two hassocks, setting the shaking Bancrofters off again in a tremendous uproar. Nevertheless, the lucky batter remained at second, where Stark and Labelle kept him dancing back and forth while Locke took Trollop's measure and put him away until the next game should be played.

With no one batting ahead of him, Locke advanced to the pan in the last of the eighth without instructions. The first ball was too close, but the second came slanting over, and he bunted. Again it was the unexpected, and never had a prettier bunt been pulled off. Nevertheless, it was only Tom's wonderful knack of starting at high speed with the first jump and covering the ground like a streak that enabled him to reach the sack a gasping breath ahead of the ball.

"Safe!" cried the umpire.

The Bullies started to kick, nearly every man on the team taking part in it. The crowd hooted and hissed, but it was only the nerve of the umpire in pulling his watch which finally sent the Bancroft players, growling, back to their positions. There was so much money wagered on the game that they could not afford to lose it through forfeiture; but henceforth they badgered the umpire on almost every decision, even scoffing when he declared in their favor.

Labelle sacrificed Locke to second. Stark, thirsting for a hit, hoisted a fly to center. Then, just as the visitors were breathing easier, Crandall smashed a drive into right field.

Locke was on the way to third even before bat and ball met. Sockamore, coaching, seeing Tom coming like the wind, took a desperate chance, and, with a furious flourish of his arms, signaled for him to keep on. Out in right field Mace got the sphere and poised himself for a throw to the pan.

There was a choking hush. Staring, breathless, suffering with suspense, the watchers waited.

"Slide!" yelled Sockamore, with a shriek like the blast of a locomotive whistle.

Spikes first, Locke slid. The whistling ball spanked into Bangs' clutches and he lunged to

make the tag. But Tom's feet had slipped across the rubber, and the downward motion of the umpire's open, outspread hand declared him safe.

Again the Bullies protested, and again the umpire was compelled to produce his watch. With difficulty the excited crowd was kept off the field.

Laughing, Stark had helped Locke to rise, and made a show of brushing some of the dust from him.

"It's your game that wins to-day, if you can hold them down now," declared Larry. "It was bunting when they weren't expecting it that did the trick. Oh, say, there'll be some sore heads in Bancroft to-night!"

Henry Cope came bursting out of the crowd back of the bench to shake hands with Locke.

"Sufferin' Moses, whut a game!" he exclaimed. "If I ain't under the doctor's care ter-morrer it'll be queer. Keep 'em right where they be, an' we've won."

"Lots of good that will do us when the game is counted out of the series," sneered Hutchinson.

"Even if they count it out," returned the grocer, "folks round this town're goin' to have a heap o' Bancroft's money t' spend."

Reddy Crandall did not score. He had done

his part well, and he uttered no complaint when Anastace failed to hit.

The Bullies had not given up. Savage, sarcastic, insolent, they fought it out in the first of the ninth, bearing themselves, until the last man was down, as if they still believed they would win. Locke, however, had them at his mercy, refusing to prolong the agony by letting a hitter reach first.

With some difficulty he fought off the delighted Kingsbridgers who swarmed, cheering, around him, and would have lifted him to their shoulders. When he finally managed to break clear of the throng he thought suddenly of Janet, and looked round for her.

Benton King was driving toward the gate by which teams and autos were admitted to the field. She had lowered her parasol, and, before disappearing through the gate, she turned to gaze backward, as if looking for some one in the midst of the still-cheering crowd that covered the diamond.

CHAPTER XLIV

FACING HIS ACCUSERS

SEASONABLE July weather caused discomfort for the seven persons assembled in the dingy office of Rufus Kilgore for the purpose of attending the meeting called to consider Manager Mike Riley's claims. Riley himself, in his shirt sleeves, sat with his back toward one of the wide-open windows, a handkerchief tucked round his neck inside his collar, grumbling and smoking. Anson Graham, president of the league, a serious, middle-aged man, with block-trimmed whiskers, who had the look of one who might be just, but would rarely temper his justice with mercy, was talking to Kilgore, the secretary of the organization, who occupied the chair at the desk.

David Farman and William Jones, representing Fryeburg and Lakeport, respectively, were aimlessly discussing various topics, such as the weather, crop prospects, and the ardent desire that the usual number of boarders from the city might be netted by the blandishments of adver-

tisements which pictured the part of the country in which they were interested as a summer Eden. Benton King, appearing restless, talked in low tones to the ever-icy Bob Hutchinson.

“Confound it!” growled Riley, looking at his watch. “Where’s Hen Cope ’n’ that man Hazelton? It’s one minute of time fur the meetin’ to begin, ’n’ they oughter be here.”

“Perhaps they won’t come,” said the lawyer. “Cope is a mule, and he may try to block proceedings by staying away.”

“But he can’t do that,” rasped Mike. “We can go ahead without him. It’s time. Hadn’t you better call the meetin’ to order, Mr. Graham?”

At this moment, footsteps were heard on the stairs, and the door opened, to admit the puffing Kingsbridge grocer, who paused to remove his hat, mop his shining, moist dome, and look the assemblage over.

“Good evenin’, ever’body,” he said pleasantly. “On time, ain’t I?”

“Just about, an’ that’s all,” answered Riley. “Where’s th’ slip’ry guy that’s caused all this trouble?”

“You mean Locke? Ain’t he here?”

“I mean Hazelton, ’n’ he ain’t here.”

“That’s strange,” said Cope, plainly a trifle

disturbed. "He lef' Kingsbridge on the early train this mornin', sayin' that he'd meet me here to-night. I thought sure I'd find him waitin'."

"Left town, hey?" cried Riley. "Left town this mornin'! Well, I swear! So help me, he's skipped!"

He was not the only one through whose head had passed the same thought, but Henry Cope immediately raised an agitated protest against such an idea, asserting his belief that the absent man would put in an appearance. They were induced to wait a while, although it was likely that Cope was the only one who was not satisfied that time was being wasted. In his heart, even the grocer began to doubt.

As the minutes ticked away, Cope looked anxious, Riley smoked and growled, Hutchinson remained cool, and Benton King fidgeted. Finally Anson Graham said:

"Gentlemen, it is now ten minutes past the time set for this meeting to be called, and I think we had better proceed without further delay; for it seems that the party accused does not intend to appear in his own defense. If you will please come to order, the secretary will read the protest of Manager Riley which led to—"

Breathless and anxious, Henry Cope had been

listening to the sound of hurried footsteps on the stairs, and now, as the door was thrust open and the tardy one stepped in, he gave an exclamation of great relief and satisfaction.

“I beg your pardon, gentlemen,” said Tom Locke, his face flushed. “I believe I am somewhat late, but it was the fault of my watch, which I have discovered is slow. I hope I have not kept you waiting long.”

He bowed to everybody in a general, pleasant way, smiling on Cope, who had sprung forward to grip his hand.

“I knowed you’d come,” said the grocer. “I told them you’d be here. Now, gents, you can go ahead.”

A hard gleam had appeared in the eyes of Tom Locke as he noted the presence of Benton King, but, after the first swift glance, he ignored the lumberman’s son.

The meeting was called to order in the regular manner, and Kilgore read the written protest of Manager Riley, which, as it appeared, had privately been formally worded by the lawyer himself. The document curtly charged that “the baseball player passing under the name of Tom Locke and appearing as a member of the Kingsbridge team of the Northern League” was in

reality Paul Hazelton, of Princeton, and made the claim that, because of "unterminated negotiations," Riley held an indisputable right to the man's services. Locke's face wore a half-mocking smile as he listened to the reading.

"You have heard the charge, sir," said Anson Graham, turning to Tom. "What answer have you to make?"

This was the moment Cope had dreaded, but his pitcher had given assurance that he would be ready to meet every charge, and he waited now, his lips parted, for the young man to answer. His surprise, however, amounted to something bordering on consternation when Locke quietly replied:

"It seems to me, Mr. President, that the first duty of the man who makes this charge is to establish that I am the party referred to in the document."

"Huh!" grunted Riley, without regard for the regular order of procedure. "'Twon't do ye no good to deny it. We've got the proof."

"Pardon me, Riley," said Graham reprovingly; "I am questioning the young man. Do you deny, sir, that you are Paul Hazelton, of Princeton?"

"Yes, sir," was the prompt, clear answer, "I deny it."

Henry Cope nearly fell off his chair. In great agitation, he reached out, grasped the speaker's coat, tugged at it, and whispered:

"Boy, boy, be keerful! It's too late for that to do any good."

The dismay of the grocer was apparent to all, and provoked some smiles; but the unruffled young man simply turned and spoke to him in a low, calm tone:

"Leave this to me, Mr. Cope, please."

"In that case," said the president, maintaining an impartial manner, "it will be necessary for Manager Riley to produce satisfactory evidence that you *are* Paul Hazelton. Mr. Riley, your evidence."

"I've got it," asserted Mike positively. "Mr. King can show somethin' that'll settle the matter in short order."

CHAPTER XLV

THE FORGERY

BENTON KING, called upon, rose and expressed regret that circumstances had involved him in the unfortunate affair. He spoke hurriedly, without looking at Locke, although he was well aware that Tom's eyes were fixed upon him all the while.

At the first sight of Kingsbridge's left-handed pitcher, he stated, he had been struck by the thought that he had seen the man somewhere before, and, after racking his brain, he suddenly recalled that it was at a game played the previous year, between Princeton and Harvard, when Locke, to use the name he had given in Kingsbridge, had sat in uniform upon the Princeton bench.

He went on to explain, with an effort to hide any personal animosity in the matter, that the man's denial that he was Hazelton had led him to communicate with a friend in New York, requesting this friend to go to Princeton for the purpose of obtaining the photograph of the college pitcher.

This the friend had done, getting the picture from the photographer who was generally patronized by the undergraduates. Concluding, King produced the photograph and the letter that had accompanied it in the same mail, and placed them in evidence.

Locke listened and watched, without making a movement, a scornful smile on his lips. He heard the letter read by King, and saw it turned over, with the picture, to Anson Graham. The president glanced at the letter, then seemed to make a comparison of the photographed features and those of the young man standing so enigmatically cool beside the chair of Henry Cope.

"Sir," said Graham, extending the picture, "do you deny that this is your likeness?"

Locke barely glanced at it.

"It is my picture," he acknowledged.

"And that," exulted Mike Riley, "*does* settle it! He's Hazelton, and here's a letter from him, dated December twenty-seven, last year, answering a letter o' mine, in which I offered him twenty-five a week and board to pitch fer Bancroft this season, a-sayin' he wanted forty 'n' board. Take notice that he don't say he won't play for twenty-five, but that it's jest a clever try to boost me t' forty. I base my claim on that letter.

"I cal'late this smooth guy, who's had the nerve to stan' up here an' practically swear that he ain't Paul Hazelton, used my offer to boost his value with Mr. Cope, who, I hear, is payin' him 'outer all reason. Sneaky, underhand work, I call it. Such a man is dang'r'us, an' I hope that he will be put on the blacklist so that he won't be able to play on any team in the league. That's the way to fix him."

"I would like," said Locke, "the privilege of examining that letter."

"Let him see it arter the rest have seen it," said Riley. "'Twon't do him no good t' destroy it."

"I have no desire to destroy it," declared Tom, when the letter presently reached his hands and he had glanced it over. "On the contrary, I have a most powerful desire to preserve it carefully; for it is a miserable forgery, and it would give me no little satisfaction to see the scoundrels responsible for its production properly prosecuted for a criminal offense."

"Bah!" snarled Riley. "More of his bluffin'. He must think we're fools t' let him put over anything like that on us. He's trapped, an' he can't wiggle outer it. Mr. President, I urge immediate action on my protest, and I hope the directors of

the league will put Mr. Paul Hazelton on the black-list."

Again Henry Cope tugged at Locke's coat skirts; he looked pitifully downcast and disheartened.

"You tole me," he whispered dolefully, "that you had it on 'em somehow, but it seems t' me that they've got it on you."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Cope," was the cool reply; "this meeting is not over, and there is something mighty interesting yet to come." He turned to the others. "Mr. President, I have some witnesses, waiting outside at my request, whom I ask leave to introduce. I will call them."

Stepping swiftly to one of the open windows, he thrust his head out and called. Directly footsteps were again heard on the stairs. The door was flung open to admit Sam Bryant, the bell boy of the Central Hotel at Kingsbridge, followed by a stranger, who did not seem more than twenty years of age. The entrance of the boy appeared, for once, at least, to jostle Bob Hutchinson out of his usual unemotional calm, and the manager glared at Sam, alarm and menace in his unpleasant eyes.

"I have asserted that this letter," said Locke,

holding up the missive in question, "is a forgery. It is a rather clever imitation of my handwriting, a specimen of which was taken from my desk in my room last Sunday, together with a letter which the pilferer dared not present as evidence at this meeting.

"I have reasons to believe that a party present in this room was guilty of rifling that desk. It happens that I did a slight favor for the younger brother of this lad here, who is a bell boy at the Central, and Sammy's conscience has been troubling him during the past few days, finally leading him into a confession which interested me not a little. Go ahead, Sammy, and tell what you have to tell."

In less than a minute, the icy Mr. Hutchinson, warmed to the melting point, was on his feet denouncing Sammy Bryant as a wicked little fabricator; for the lad had told of being bribed by Hutchinson to slip the pass-key of Locke's room from the office rack and unlock the door while Tom was absent at church, and had averred that, watching, he had seen Hutchinson sneak into the room.

"I'll make you smart for this, you young rascal!" declared Hutch savagely. "You'll lose your job, anyhow."

“Mebbe,” returned the boy; “but you’ll lose *yourn*.”

“What’s this mess got t’ do with Hazelton’s letter ter me?” demanded Riley, essaying a diversion. “If it was true, which I don’t b’lieve at all, ’twouldn’t have nothin’ t’ do with the genuineness of that letter from Paul Hazelton.”

“But,” said Locke, something almost like pity in his contemptuous smile, “to illustrate what pitiful bunglers you and Hutchinson are, Riley, let me tell you that in making an imitation of my handwriting and attaching the supposed signature of Paul Hazelton, you have mired yourselves in a pit of your own digging. For, as I am not Paul Hazelton, a letter written in imitation of my penmanship and signed with his name *must* be a forgery. It is my turn now to put the work of a photographer in evidence.”

CHAPTER XLVI

CLEARED UP

THE youthful stranger handed over a large, square, flat package, and Locke quickly removed the wrapper, displaying a group photograph of a team of youthful baseball players, upon the breasts of whose shirts could be seen the word "Princeton."

"This," said Tom, displaying the picture, "shows the Princeton College nine of this season, with the name of every player printed at the bottom. Here you may see the name of Hazelton, followed by the letter P, and I would like to have you look at it well; look at it, and see if you would call it my picture. Also look over the rest of the faces to see if you can find mine among them."

Shaking with excitement, his eyes bulging with wonder, Henry Cope was standing on his toes to peer at the picture over Locke's shoulder. Anson Graham was looking at it, too; and, with the exception of Hutchinson and King, the others flocked round to get a peep.

"Great sassafras!" spluttered Cope. "I writ

a letter, makin' Paul Hazelton an offer to pitch for Kingsbridge, and *you* come in answer to that letter. You likewise sent me a message—"

"Saying: 'Coming, P. Hazelton,' " interrupted Locke. "Of course, it never occurred to you that there might be two Hazeltons. I have never denied that my name is Hazelton, but I have denied repeatedly that it is Paul Hazelton. It is Philip. Four years ago I pitched a few games for the Princeton varsity in my junior year, but was obliged to give it up because of the opposition of my father, a clergyman, who, having had a friend killed in the game, has a perfect horror of it.

"My younger brother, Paul, having caught the fever, has incurred the displeasure of our strait-laced father to the extent of being refused further financial assistance in completing his college career. Paul told me of this, and, at the same time, of a splendid offer he had received to pitch professionally on a bush-league team. He had this year made a record for himself with his college team, but it looked as if he would be forced to play for money in order to pay his way through college.

"One year—spent mainly in waiting for clients—as a lawyer in a small city had not placed me in position to help him, but finally I was struck with

the idea of filling that baseball opening in his place. Belonging to an athletic club, I had kept in good condition, having continued to pitch occasionally after graduating from college. In ten or twelve weeks of summer baseball, at the salary offered, I could earn enough to pay my brother's expenses at Princeton for the coming year.

"If the man who had made the offer were to learn that it was a brother of the famous Princeton pitcher who responded, instead of the pitcher himself, he might be inclined to cut down the amount he had flourished as such an alluring bait, and hence it was decided not to take him into our confidence. Mr. Cope, I humbly crave your pardon."

"Oh, thunder!" exclaimed the delighted grocer. "Don't mention it! Lordy! Lordy! Ain't it funny!"

There were some persons present, however, to whom the humor of the situation made no appeal whatever.

The Kingsbridge pitcher continued:

"As the given name of both my brother and myself begins with P, the mistake of the photographer who handed out one of my pictures when Mr. King's obliging friend called for a photograph of Paul Hazelton is readily under-

stood. In order to settle this controversy for all time, I thought best to wire my brother to come on, and it was to meet him here in Bancroft that I left Kingsbridge this morning. Gentlemen, let me introduce Paul Hazelton."

The youthful stranger who had arrived in company with the bell boy bowed and smiled.

"I'm it," he said. "But, to judge by his record in this league, when it comes to pitching, I'm an 'also ran' compared with Phil."

"It should be plain to you now, Mr. Riley," said Philip Hazelton grimly, "that you made a very bad break when you produced a letter, seemingly in my handwriting, dated at Princeton, and signed with the name of Paul Hazelton. Mr. Hutchinson, also, has blundered in— Oh, by the way where is he? He seems to be missing."

"He's sneaked," cried Sammy Bryant. "He got out when nobody was lookin'."

"He'd better sneak," declared Henry Cope. "I don't blame him a bit for skedaddlin' outer here. He'd better git outer Kingsbridge in a hurry, too."

The following evening found Philip Hazelton meditating over a daintily perfumed note that had been brought him by a boy. A dozen times

he read it; as many times he started up, as if with a purpose, only to falter.

At last, however, he literally tore the blue-serge suit off the hangers in the wardrobe, and lost no time in donning it, save that wasted through the fumbling produced by his almost frantic haste.

"After all," he told himself, rejoicing, "she wasn't to blame. King did it with that photograph. It's no wonder she thought me untruthful. Will I call at eight this evening; will I *please* call at eight? Will I! It's almost half past seven now. I'm afraid I never can wait for eight o'clock."

It was Janet herself who let him in when he rang at the parsonage door.

"Mr. Locke—I mean Hazelton," she said, "I want to offer you a humble apology. It was simply dreadful of me. Can you pardon me?"

He did not leave her long in doubt, and the pleasure of that Sunday meeting in the woods paled in comparison with the delight of the ensuing hour. Henry Cope had improved the first opportunity to tell her all that had taken place at the meeting in Bancroft.

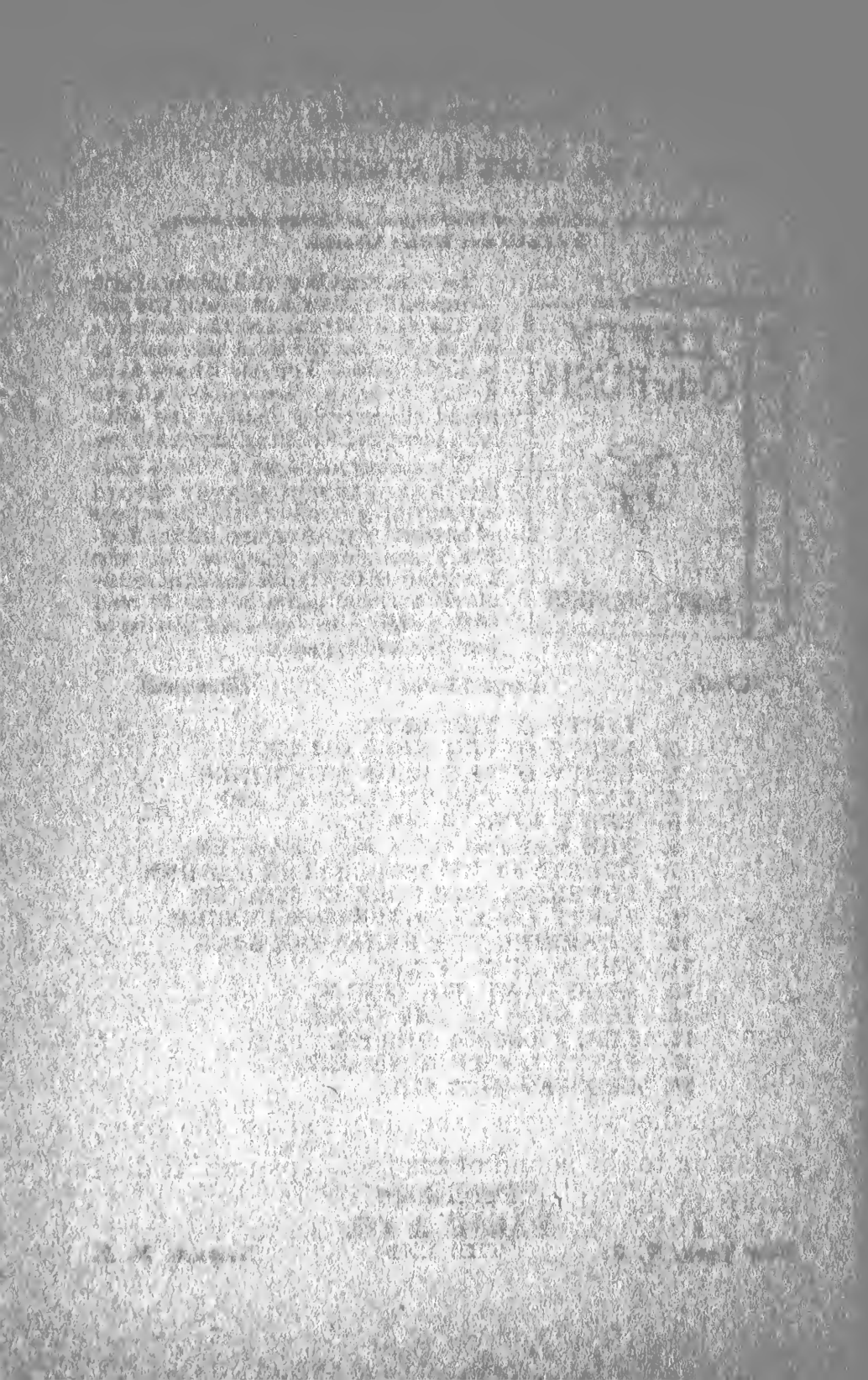
"Oh," she cried, when she thought of it, as they sat close together in the parlor, "I have a surprise for you. I told my father all about it,

and he says he knows your father; that they were chums at college. Isn't that a delightful coincidence. And father wants to meet you, and I think—I'm quite sure—he'll form a better opinion of some baseball players. I'm going to make him let me attend every game here in Kingsbridge. He just can't keep me away, that's all."

Little did she realize when she spoke that she was destined to witness Lefty's struggles and success as a Major League pitcher afar from Kingsbridge and the "bush" where he had created such a sensation. The story of his first season in fast company is told in the next volume of this series, the title of which is, "Lefty o' the Big League."

In the course of their chat, he mentioned his sister, whom he affectionately called "Tid," but, as she turned away at that moment, he failed to detect the strange look that flashed into Janet's eyes. When he finally left, she accompanied him to the door to let him out. The shaded lamp in the hall was low and dim, and they stood there some moments, close together, speaking in subdued tones, save when—

After he was gone, she lingered by the door, listening to the sound of his footsteps until it died away on the silent street.

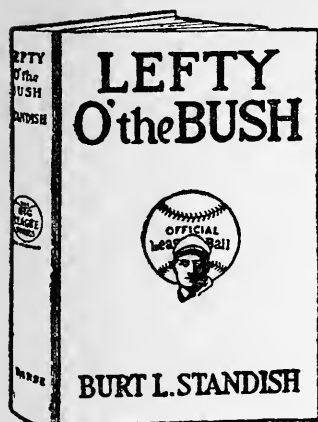


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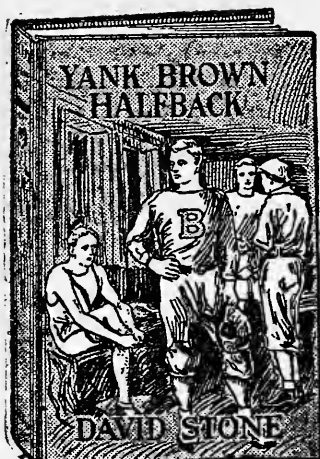
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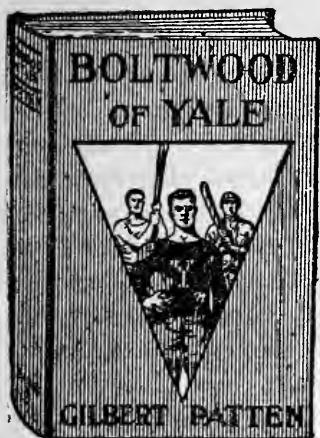
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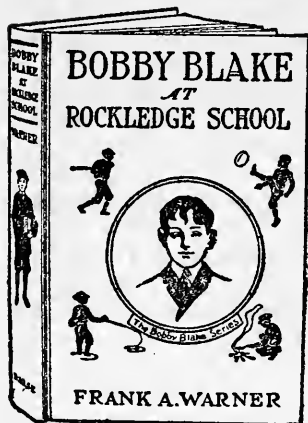
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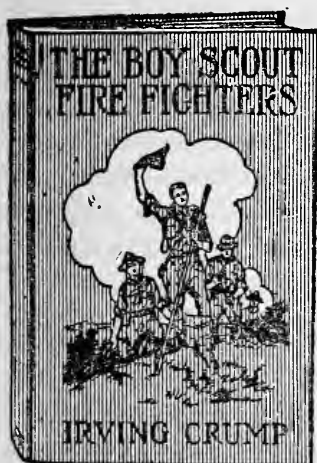
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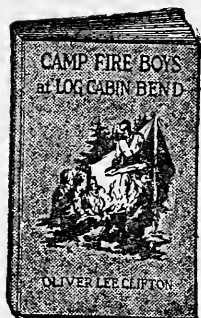
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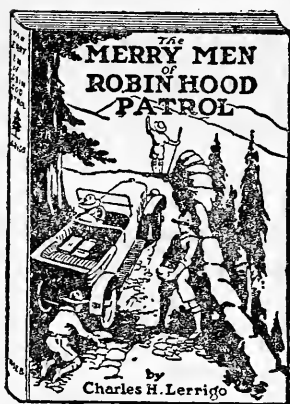
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